

NOW THE KING IS DEAD

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By

Salah Abdul Saboor

Translated with an Introduction

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For May and Mutazah Abdul Saboor,
and the memory of a great poet.

INTRODUCTION

Although he died nearly five years ago, Salah Abdul Saboor remains Egypt's most prominent and influential contemporary poet, not only because he has created a new poetic idiom, and fashioned a new sensibility which few poets have as yet been able to escape or convincingly go beyond, but also on account of the leading role he played in re-establishing Arabic poetic drama as a viable theatrical proposition on the modern Egyptian stage after it had nearly completely disappeared under the tide of experimental and realistic prose drama [1].

The movement towards the rejuvenation of Arabic poetry, which eventually led to a revival of verse drama, began in 1957 when Abdul Saboor published his first collection **People of My Country.** This collection, as S. Sarhan rightly remarks, "marked a break with the rigid verse forms of classical Arabic poetry,"[2] and, indeed, without this break it would have been impossible for Abdul-Saboor to embark on his dramatic career, seven years later, with his great full-length verse play **The Tragedy of El-Hallaj** (1964).

The new verse form which Abdul-Saboor championed and helped, with a few other Arab pioneers, to hew and refine was ideally suited for dramatic expression. It allowed for changes in the number of feet in each verse line; for a change in metre from one line to another, and, more importantly, it freed itself from the shackles of rhyme which in drama would give human speech an artificial proverbial neatness similar to the effect produced by the heroic couplet in 18th century English heroic tragedy, and impede the flow of meaning from one line to another, thus interfering with the inner rhythm of the dramatic mood. Just as Elizabethan drama would have been impossible without blank verse, modern Arabic verse drama would never have taken off the ground without the efforts of the "new verse movement"(3).

Having fought and won his battle for a freer and more pliable verse form to work within, a battle which reached its fiercest stages in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Abdul-Saboor concentrated all his creative efforts on introducting into the Arabic poem the concept of organic unity, thus completely transforming the face of Arabic poetry, at least in Egypt. The typical classical poem, in most cases, depended for its sense of unity on primarily external qualities, i.e., unity of rhyme and metre; the more subtle issue of inner imaginative cohesion, which the modern reader has come to demand and insist upon, was completely subject to chance. So long as the poet adhered to the rules and fulfilled the requirements of the rigid external form, he could be as rambling and formless as he liked without being taken to task.

Abdul-Saboor rejected this mode of poetic expression which reduced poetic utterance to a form of eloquent public-speaking, forceful, and effective, perhaps, but very far removed from the intensity, the taut interrelatedness and internal coherence of the poetic experience as he understood it after he had come under the influence of Shakespeare, Eliot, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Lorka and Brecht, among others.

Abdul Saboor was easily the most well-read and best informed contemporary Arab poet; he read deeply into literature, history, philosophy, and religion, both eastern and western. And though he assimilated a great deal of western thought and philosophy, he never lost sight of his old Arabic heritage or sought to dissociate himself from it. In his bold and exciting book **A New Reading of Ancient Arabic Poetry,** he looks at this heritage critically and sifts it to find out the elements and portions that could still relate to modern Arab man's experience, and to define the voices that could still address his consciousness effectively. This book focuses Abdul Saboor's conscious effort throughout his creative career to establish a fruitful dialectic between the past and the present, the inherited eastern sensibility and the aquired western one, both on the levels of historical and artistic experience. And it is this dialectical relationship that gives his poetry its striking dramatic quality(4).

Indeed, it was inevitable that Abdul Saboor's dramatic poet ry should eventually lead him to drama, for the man's mind was essentially dramatic; it viewed existence and human experience in terms of a conflict in which the violent antitheses of past and present; word and deed; thought and action; myth and history; body and soul; abstract and concrete; idealism and materialism; sexual passion and religious ardour; the temporal and the eternal; the relative and the absolute; tragedy and comedy; Plato and Marx; Aristotle and Brecht; the Existentialists and the Moslem mystics; interlocked and interacted. in a valuable study of Abdul Saboor's poetry, entitled "The Lover of Wisdom and the Sage of Love", Izz Al-Din Isma'il has emphasized the antithetical quality of the poet's mind and the dialectical quality of his poetry. Isma'il perceptively argues that Abdul Saboor's poetry merges in one paradoxical synthesis the experiences of Faust and Don Juan to create a prototype of modern man(5). One should add to Faust and Don Juan, however, Christ, as the concrete metaphor of the

synthesis, and Hamlet, as its emotional dimension of existential human suffering and perplexity.

Abdul-Sabbor produced five plays in all[6]; **The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj** (1964), rendered into English as **Murder in Baghdad; Night Traveller** and **A princess Waiting** (1969), two one-act plays; **Laila and the Madman** (Al-Majnoon) (1970); and, finally, **Now The king is Dead,** literally, **After the king is Dead** (1971)[7]. Read together, in chronological order, the plays represent an intense imaginative quest in the realm of art for philosophical repose and harmony; they vividly trace the agonizing arduous path the poet travelled towards the final synthesis he tentatively reached and precariously held in his last play.

In an interesting article entitled **"Salah Abdul Saboor's Theatre: Meaning and structure"**,M.S. Farid stresses the universal quality of Abdul Saboor's theatre and declares that in terms of themes and dramatic conventions it firmly belongs in the mainstream of modern drama[8]. And, indeed, if one remembers how Shakespeare's Hamlet and Eliot's Becket constantly hover around Abdul Saboor's Al-Hallaj, how **A Princess Waiting** strongly evokes the theatre of Maeterlinck and the symbolists, and **Night Traveller** the drama of Ionesco, and how **Now the king is Dead** brings to mind at once Shakespeare and Brecht, Ionesco's **Exit the king,** Edward Albee's **Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf** and Pirandello's theatre in the theatre-, one can hardly deny the justice of Farid's remark.

Paradoxically, however, inspite of, or, rather, besides this palpable Western, or rather, universal quality, Abdul-Saboor's theatre has an unmistakable national flavour and is deeply steeped in Arabic history, myth and folklore. Moreover, it is, in one respect, an eminently political, topical theatre, i.e., the authentic product of a particular historical moment in the life of a nation, projecting all its conflicts, dilemmas, and urgent concerns. **In fact the key to Abdul-Saboor's dramatic genius lies in his**

ability to extend and enrich the significance of local events and urgent topical issues, of transmuting them through myth, folklore and fantasy into universal themes of enduring human interest. To illustrate how this fusion of the imported and the home-grown occurs, how the antithesis of eastern heritage and western influence is resolved into an original dramatic synthesis both in terms of theme and pattern, or form and content, we shall briefly examine the plays.

The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj revolves round the revolt and martyrdom of the mystic-rebel Al-Hussein Bin Al-Mansour in Baghdad in the year 309 H.(c.930 A.D.) Al-Hallaj was at once a mystic, a poet, and a social reformer, and when he was tried and executed, it was not certain whether his charge was heresy or political agitation. Understandably, in view of his 'socialist' leanings, his urgent sense of poetic vocation, and his deeply-ingrained mysticism[9] Abdul-Saboor found in this historical figure an apt vehicle to project his own dilemma as an intellectual torn between the overpowering urge to dedicate himself completely to the nurturing of his creative energy, and the demands of his social conscience that push him in the direction of political involvement and action. The conflict crystallized as one between thought and action, and, at this point, the dilemma of the historical Hallaj, the poetical persona of Abdul Saboor, unconsciously merged, in the crucible of the imagination, with Hamlet's dilemma. "O, cursed spite, that I was ever born to set it right" became Abdul Saboor's, and his hero's urgent and agonizing cry, as well as Hamlet's. In other words, Shakespeare's hero, with all his rich and ambiguous associations became the medium that transmuted the particular historical Arab figure, and the particular Egyptian poet's dilemma into a universal theme. And the thematic transformation naturally and inevitably produced a technical transformation.

Abdul Saboor consciously fashioned his play along the lines **of Aristotelian tragedy**[10]. **The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj, however,** offers a new formula which is not strictly Aristotelian. In his stimulating article "Tragedy and Symbolism in **The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj** and **Laila and the Madman**", Samy Khashaba convincingly argues that in **Al-Hallaj,** Abdul Saboor works out an original concept of tragedy which is distinctly different from the original Aristotelian concept and its later reformulations by Hegel and Nietzsche, on the one hand, and on the other, from Ferdinand Burnetiere's modern concept which he bases on the ideas of the enlightenment about man's freedom and his ability to decide his own destiny[11]. The opposition of the individual's will to the will of fate, and the inevitable eventual triumph of fate which underlies the classical concept of tragedy was rejected by Abdul Saboor, and so was the metaphysical void in which Brunetiere's theory of tragedy placed the individual's free will. Both were rejected in favour of a concept of tragedy that harmonizes with the philosophical vision of the relation of man to God, of individual to divine will, inherent in Oriental Christianity and Islam, and with the national culture and psychological make-up. According to this concept, man, in seeking to determine his fate freely, is ultimately realizing the will of God who has created him in his own image. One cannot help noting here the basically romantic and optimistic nature of this concept (and, indeed, Islam has often been described as an essentially romantic and optimistic faith, a faith, too that regards social action as a kind of worship and a means of spiritual fulfilment.) Abdul Saboor's new kind of tragedy championed the individual without severing his links with the Divine authority; for whereas in classical tragedy the individual stood in opposition to the divine powers and their temporal reflection in the moral-social- political system that governed men's lives, in Abdul Saboor's type of tragedy, the individual is aligned to God against the temporal system which is depicted as obstructing the fulfilment of the Divine will.

The Aristotelian hero's typical **Hamartia** is transformed in this new concept of tragedy into a positive heroic action which is individually chosen against what, on the surface, appears to be the will of God, but is later revealed to be in harmony with it and only against the will of a misguided or corrupt temporal authority. And though the temporal authority finally succeeds in destorying the hero, the tragic end (death, which in **The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj,** significantly takes the form of a crucifixion) becomes, paradoxically, a fulfilment and a triumph for the hero and a confirmation of the divine will, while the triumph of the temporal authority in destroying the rebel hero is defined as a crime in the eyes of God and a breach of faith. In this way, the secular and religious planes merge, and the tragic hero becomes a social reformer and a prophet, at once a political revolutionary, and an emissary of fate. And since Al-Hallaj is in one aspect a poet, as most of Abdul Saboor's later heroes (or **personas),** one suspects that Abdul Saboor was reverting to the pre-Aristotelian idea of the poet as prophet and a leader who guides men through divine inspiration —— an idea passionately advocated and given its social dimensions by Shelley whom Abdul Saboor greatly admired.

For Abdul Saboor, the prototype of this positive tragic hero was Christ, the physical embodiment of the divine word, and the material symbol of the marriage of heaven and earth. In **The Tragedy of Al Hallaj,** Abdul Saboor takes pains to stress the humanity of Christ (to whom his hero is explicitly compared) rather than his divinity, by giving his Christ-hero a moving Hamletian dimension: He uses Hamlet's sense of uncertainty, bewilderment and loss to focus on the human agony of Christ's last cry on the cross, 'O, God! Why hast thou forsaken me? - a cry that the Hallaj does not actually utter, but which is clearly implied in his manner of death.

The image of Christ as the resolution of all paradoxes and antitheses haunted Abdul Saboor's mind. The Saviour appears in his poetry as poet, social leader, political rebel, and tormented man. He embodied for Abdul Saboor Byron's man, half-dust and half-deity, Hamlet's paradoxical creature - 'what a piece of work is man!', and Eliot's Prufrock and Fisher king. And just as Eliot mixed Indian and Christian mythology - 'Shanti, shanti," shanti, in his **Waste Land,** Abdul Saboor, who was interested in Indian culture and spent some time in India, was able to relate the Christian myth to the fertility rites of the pagan religions of the Eastern valleys in the manner of Byron[12]. The full implications of this fusion, however, did not completely materialize until much later in **Now The king is Dead.**

After **The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj,** Abdul Saboor embarked on two new dramatic experiments which reveal his keen interest in modern dramatic techniques and forms. **Night Traveller,** a one-act play, was consciously written in the tradition of the theatre of the absurd, as Abdul Saboor himself admitted (he never made a secret of his great admiration for Ionesco in particular), and has been critically discussed and evaluated in this light[13]. That the play draws consciously on the methods and techniques of absurdist drama is quite apparent. What has escaped attention, however, is the fact that Abdul Saboor offers in it his own version of the absurd in the same manner in which he offered in **Al-Hallaj** his own concept of tragedy. Typically, and ingeniously, Abdul Saboor uses his own feelings about the Egyptian current historical moment as a starting point for reflecting on man's relation to history in general. He portrays history here as a mechanical, oppressive process which senselessly grinds on (like a night-train without a destination). Into this process, man is helplessly caught (like the passenger who is trapped in the night-train) and loses his

divine spark, his human dignity, his identity, and finally his very existence.

Humanity in the play is represented by the poor night traveller, a colourless commuter, a typical product of modern civilization like Eliot's typist in **The Waste Land,** who symbolically drops and loses his rosary at the beginning of the play, and with it all his spiritual powers of resistance. Like a typical modern city commuter, he takes out some reading stuff to while away the dreary hours of the night journey, and the "parchment he takes out from his coat/wherein history has been recorded in a mere ten lines", with its "black embossed letters"(14), or headlines, is the equivalent of the modern newspaper —— Abdul Saboor's symbol of the falsification and dehumanization of history.

The spiritual void created by the loss of the rosary, the symbol of religious faith and the spiritual dimension of existence, is soon filled with the august shadows of past and present political despots: Alexander, Hannibal, Tamerlane, Hitler, and Lyndon Johnson. The shadows suddenly merge into each other and materialize in the figure of the conductor, the leader of the nightmarish train of history, who confuses and torments the passenger, accuses him of having killed God and stolen his identity card, deprives him of his right to exist on the train or know his destination by swallowing his ticket, and finally kills him in a manner strongly reminiscent of the closing scene of Ionesco's **Tuer sans gages.**

The conductor who quotes Nietzsche's famous "God is dead" to the passenger is the embodiment of Nietzsche's superman, the history maker, the naked "will to power" and of his idea of history as "eternal recurrence" without moral purpose or hope for improvement. By identifying Nietzsche's superman with political

dictatorship and oppression, past and present, Abdul Saboor was offering a critique of Niezsche's view of history rather than endorsing it, as some critics have argued. Salah Abdul Saboor admits in **My Life in Poetry** the deep and lasting impression Nietzsche made on his mind[15]. However, the romantic socialist in him stood in violent opposition to the pessimistic existentialist. And it is this opposition (which comes across clearly in the form of scathing irony) that gives the play its vitality and the dialectical quality which distinguishes it from other absurdist dramas.

In absurdist drama an annihilating sense of futility and inescapable oppression predominates; it forms an intrinsic aspect of the human condition. No human action, no amount of faith or social change can alter what is presented as an ineluctable mode, a vicious circle. The forces of oppression, Sartre's inimical nothing ness, are amoral, and beyond the reach of human action. **In Night Traveller,** however, no matter how much it draws on the style of the theatre of the absurd, the oppression of the historical process, since it is strongly related to a particular, and, therefore, transient moment in the political history of a nation, never strikes us as an unalterable condition of existence. Abdul Saboor's purpose in enacting in his drama Nietzsche's concept of history is not to enforce and confirm it, but, rather to expose the foolishness and guilt of the people who believe it, acquiesce in it, and use it as an excuse for inaction, leaving their oppressors to make use of it to foster and exercise their will to power. This message, which indirectly advocates social action, contrary to the message of absurdist drama, is embodied in the narrator-commentator, or chorus —— a technical feature quite foreign to absurdist drama and more in line with Brecht's thought and dramatic practice. After **Night Traveller,** Brecht's influence is more and more discernible in Abdul Saboor's theatre and is joined by an attempt to

break the Nietzschean vicious circle of history by stressing the vital procreative powers of man and his creative energy both on the spiritual and sexual levels.

Politics and sex are the two dominant themes in Abdul-Saboor's next one-acter **A Princess Waiting;** oriental myth and folklore provide its framework; and Maeterlinck's symbolist theatre supplies its technical procedure. Abdul Saboor based the play on an old Arab tale which tells of a princess who fell in love with an invader of her country and helped him to break the siege, thus betraying the king, her father. The invader could not trust her since she had betrayed her father; so, when he establishes himself as ruler of her country, he kills her[16]

Besides this old tale, Abdul-Saboor uses other elements of near eastern folklore, primarily the "lamentation rituals" which involve a symbolic re-enactment of the past guilty event that provokes the remorseful lamentation. This old folk ritual is presented in the manner of the play-within-the play, thus suggesting Pirandello to the mind steeped in western drama. Three women open the play with preparations for the ritualistic re-enactment of the Princess's betrayal of her father and her eventual betrayal and exile by her lover. The princess believes that by reliving her painful past she could expiate her guilt and recover the favours of her lover. But when her lover, "Al-Samandal", does arrive, she discovers that he wants to use her once more as a tool or a weapon in his political game of power: he needs her to confer legitimacy on his rule, as daughter of the late king. But "Al-Samandal" does not gain his end; for the conscience of the princess, or, rather, the consciousness of the nation, embodied in the figure of the vagabond, itenerant poet, as his name "Al-Quarandal" suggests, interferes to stop her being deceived once more, and to reveal to her the truth of her identity.

Despite the quasi-Pirandellian opening, the play proceeds in a symbolic manner. Through her interaction with her women, her lover, and the poet, the princess grows into an ambiguous, rich symbol suggesting at once Egypt[17] (on the immediate topical-political level), mother nature and the life force, and the mother of the Saviour. As the three levels merge, the play acquires its individual identity as a national-universal artistic product. And here we begin to detect the seeds of that individual, almost pagan ethic which Abdul Saboor was unconsciously developing —— an ethic that regards vitality the creative and recreative energies of man, physically, intellectually, and spiritually, as the "primary good". We also detect here the beginnings of the poet's transformation of Christ (the child the princess/Virgin Mary was promised but never had because she sought to unite herself to the barren political-historical rather than the fruitful spiritual-divine authority) into an oriental pagan fertility god. In this play too, Abdul Saboor introduces the poet for the first time as one of the **dramatis personae** and invests him with a role he is later to develop to its full significance in **Now the King is Dead,** where the poet is almost identified with the Holy Ghost.

After these two plays, which definitely come under the umbrella of the modern political and experimental theatre, Abdul Saboor reverted to tragedy, but yet in a new and exciting fashion. If Eliot's dramatic procedure in **Murder in the Cathedral** had helped to inspire **Al-Hallaj,** then Eliot's attempt at realistic tragedy in **The Family Reunion** or **The Cocktail Party,** particularly the former, must have helped to inspire Abdul Saboor's experiment in the realistic poetic tragedy of **Laila and the Madman.** Eliot had established a textual interrelationship between his own text and Aeschylus's trilogy, and introduced Orestes and his

furies into a contemporary family setting. Abdul Saboor introduced Ahmad Shawqi's classical/romantic lover, Qais or the "Majnoon", and his Laila into the setting of a modern newspaper in the Cairo of the 1950s.

As in **A Princess Waiting,** the author resorts once more to the Pirandellian, or, rather, Elizabethan, play within the play: the staff of the newspaper which includes a poet-journalist, Sa'id, and a woman-journalist called Laila, engage in amateur dramatics and decide to rehearse Shawqi's verse drama **Majnoon Laila** which retells the sad love story of the two famous historical Arab lovers. In acting the play, or rather scenes of it, the hero and heroine at once reveal and rediscover themselves, and Abdul Saboor scores a point: art (Shawqi's verse play) illuminates life (the relationships of the group working in the newspaper). As the modern Laila plays the role of her old romantic namesake who could not break free of her heritage of moral precepts and concepts of propriety, and was eventually destroyed by them, she discovers the true nature of her love for Sa'id, her modern Qais, as a healthy all-round passion that demands physical fulfilment and continuity in the form of children. Tragically, however, she also discovers the abortive nature of her lover's passion, his enslavement to the oppressive shadows of past experiences, his dreamy escapist impulse, and his inability to take action. In desperation, like her old courterpart who gave her body to one man while her soul longed for another she rushes into the arms of a colleague who is the exact opposite of her lover, though equally sterile.

Whereas Sa'id is purely a man of thought, all words and dreams and no deeds, her new lover is purely a man of action completely devoid of thought. The result is that she swings from a physically poor but spiritually rich relationship into a spiritually

poor but sexually satisfying affair. Laila, here, like the princess in the previous play, represents Egypt at one level, and the image of wholeness, of the organic unity of body and spirit, on another. But the poet here, unlike the poet in **A Princess Waiting** appears as an ineffectual dreamer who fails to make a positive stand in the face of historical events. His impotence condemns him, since it makes him directly responsible for Laila's fall. Once more, Hamlet's dilemma and consequent uncertainty haunt an Abdul Saboor hero. But, unlike the positive spirit that permeates **The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj,** the mood here is predominantly one of defeat and paralysis.

The play within the play in Laila and the Madman, however, does not simply work as a vehicle of revelation or illumination; the author establishes a contrapuntal structure in which the relationship of the two texts (the contemporary-real and the artistic-historical) becomes more than a one-way comment; the interrelation of the two situations redefines both, and the result is a crystallization of the Don Quixotic nature of the hero, the symbol of Arab man, in both - an idea stressed by the painting of Don Quixote which hangs on the wall of the newspaper - and of Laila's tragedy, both old and new, as she loses herself between the worlds of the attainable and the desired, of hope, and achievement.

Laila and the Madman must have had a cathartic effect on Abdul Saboor, for it was immediately followed by the basically optimistic **Now the king is Dead.** Whether Nasser's death had anything to do with the dispelling of the gloom that overburdened the previous play remains a matter for conjecture. An exhilirating sense of freedom, of having cast off a crushing load, is certainly transmitted to the reader, despite the fact that Abdul Saboor stops short of giving the play a definite happy conclusion preferring to it a multiple ending. It is not surprising, therefore, to know that he admitted once to a close friend of his, Mr. Yunis

Shaheen, that this last play was the closest to his heart.

The chronological place **Now The king is Dead** occupies in the corpus of Abdul Saboor's dramatic work is curiously appropriate since both thematically and technically it concludes the imaginative inquiry, the philosophical-artistic quest that began with **Al-Hallaj.** Significantly, for the ten remaining years of his sadly short life (he died at the premature age of 50), Abdul Saboor never produced another drama, though he continued to write poetry.

In **Now The King is Dead,** which is significantly sub-titled a tragi-comedy, thus indicating its basic reconciliatory nature, Abdul Saboor gathers up all the thematic paradoxes and antithetical strands which dominated the previous plays and condenses them into one simple, though not simplified, major conflict between Eros and Thanatos, so that love comes to stand for all the positive values in human life, for wholeness,freedom, and vitality —— political, physical and spiritual, while death represents all that is inimical to life —— political oppression, physical deprivation, and spiritual coercion.

The simplicity of the conflict is matched by the basic simplicity of the characters and the framework which the poet chooses for patterning out the dramatic action. The three main characters, the king, the Queen and the Poet, represent Death, the female priniciple (the body of the world), and the male principle (the spirit of the world) in that order. When the queen and poet unit (in the blood-stained ritualistic sexual union in Act II) they form together the creative force of love which mothers hope (the child). Abdul Saboor houses his bold, simple conflict and characters into the framework of a folk-tale of wonders that tells of a bad and barren king who captures the queen of the river and a wandering poet and imprisons them in his dark formidable palace until the black bird of death invades his body. Upon his death the queen and the poet flee, and go on a restorative trip

back to the river, but they are pursued by the spirit of the dead king in the figure of the executioner. The poet defends the queen and by killing the executioner recovers his lost virility and is able to give the queen a child. Having regained their powers, the two make for the palace to rid it of the spirit of the king which still inhabits it and casts an evil spell on all its inhabitants putting them into a deep sleep(18).

The manner in which Abdul Saboor ends his play, by providing three different endings and asking the audience to choose between them, may strike some as too dramatically sophisticated, and, therefore, at odds with the simplicity of the folk tale pattern. One should remember, however, that in many folk tales which center on a quest involving many adventures, the hero is often asked at a particular point to make a decision involving many choices. One folk-tale in particular comes to mind in this connection; in it, "El-Shatir Hasan" (**Hasan the clever,** a popular folk hero who has a whole group of stories to his name), having accomplished a difficult task, sets out for home only to be faced with a choice of routes; he comes across three paths labelled: "the road to safety" ("sikkat al-salama"); "the road to regret" (sikkat al-nadama"); and "the road of no return" ("sikkat elli yerooh ma yirga'sh"). "Clever Hasan's" three roads must have been in Abdul Saboor's mind as he fashioned his three alternative endings, for one could easily give them the same labels as Hasan's routes. The first ending in which the queen is lost in the under world and the poet seeks her, Orpheus-like, but fails to recover her could easily carry the label "the road of no return", while the second ending (in which the poet and the queen delay going back to the palace until it is too late) could convincingly carry the sign "the road to regret". The only ending which could possibly by labelled "the road to safety", is the final happy one in which the queen and the poet, having united, rush back to the palace to dispel its gloom, drive away its dark shadows, and

breathe new life into it by making it the home of all the people rather than the property of one of Nietzsche's supermen and history-makers.

In **Now the King is Dead.** Abdul Saboor continues the critique of Nietzsche's view of history, which he had started in **Night Traveller,** and carries it to the point of total and open rejection. In the first act, in which the author deliberately but subtly evokes Ionesco's **Exit the king** in order to invalidate the pessimistic philosophical premises on which it rests and which equalize the death of the king with the death of Man(19), we see, in the episode of the tailor, history being created by one of Nietzsche's supermen; and the history he makes is at once a sham and a shambles: the king as superman turns out to be a sterile, impotent, bloodthirsty, self-deceiving clown. At no other place in his work does Abdul-Saboor so savagely and abandonedly satirize Nietzsche's view of history, and the savagery of the attack testifies to the depth of Abdul-Saboor's disillusionment with the reign of Nasser whom he once believed in and idolized as a Nietzschean history-maker and superman.

To this view of history which he regarded as false, mechanical and fragmented, Abdul-Saboor opposes an organic view which is at once romantic, mythical, and pagan. Eastern, and Western myths and folk-tales, as well as pagan ritual are thickly interwoven into the fabric of the play. The queen is at once the familiar captive princess in distress of many folk tales, the godess earth in pagan religions, waiting to be fertilized, a naiad, Wordsworth's spiritualized mother nature, the Greek Euridyce and Virgin Mary under the palm-tree in the august moment of communion with the Holy Ghost. Indeed, at the end of Act II, which marks the conception of the child, Abdul-Sabbor versifies the Qur'anic text which describes this part of Mary's story and puts it in the mouth of the queen as she, in a state of near sexual orgasm, washes herself in the blood which drips from the poet's wound on

her head, like reviving rain drops falling on the parched earth, after the ritualistic fight between the poet and the emissary of the court, and the sacrificial killing of the executioner:

> How wonderful it would be if the spirit of the universe
> Could visit me here and breathe its mystery into me
> Until it filled me, as a ripe fruit fills with honeyed juice!
> And when my time comes,
> I would go to the palm tree,
> And shake the trunk towards me....
> If this could happen, we wouldn't need blood to settle our differences.
> I would only have to point to the babe, and he would speak.

The element of pagan ritual, and the merging of Christian and pagan myth (the spirit of the universe = the Holy Ghost in the above lines) is not limited to this scene but, in fact, permeates the whole of Act II, and indeed the whole play. Take, for example, the following lines from the Queen's day-dream in Act I:

> .... sometimes I see him in my mind's eye rising above the hills of time,
> A glorious youth, at full noon-tide,
> A clear, unclouded sun,
> Shining upon the world, eternally pouring light,
> Renewing it as it disperses,
> An everlasting smile....

Abdul Saboor uses here the hymn ritual, the passionate song in adulation of the god, which has always formed an essential part of all religions, old and new, in order to identify the Queen's imaginary child with Christ, humanity's hope of spiritual salvation, on the one hand, and with the Ancient Egyptian Sun-god, Ra', the symbol of life's continuity on earth, on the other. The common ritual, Christian and pagan, thus unites the pagan God Ra' with Christ in a new entity which reconciles the earthiness of the

pagan gods with the spirituality of the Gods of the revealed religions. This kind of synthesis is typical of the whole play. A few lines after the above speech, for example, Abdul Saboor describes his new' Saviour' as 'full of forgiveness, as brimming with tolerance, as a bee is with nectar', thus uniting moral qualities and functions with physical and animal ones. The physical (almost erotic) spiritual synthesis is again and again underlined in this scene. See for instance the way the Queen phrases the effect of the child, or the awaited Messiah, on her, even when he is still a mere hope or dream. She cries out:

How could I live without him beside me at night,
Without feeling my budding life open up and come to
Flower at his tender touch.

The passionately spiritual and the passionately sexual are here inextricably mingled.

The metaphoric synthesis of the spiritual and physical, of the pagan and Christian, is a basic element in the texture of the play. In Act II, however, it is more prominent, particularly as this Act represents, within the whole movement of the play, a trip, a 'going out', on the physical and spiritual levels, and suggests the initiation rituals of some African tribes which involve the desertion of human society and living in the wilds alone for a while, after which one returns, after many torments and adventures, having acquired maturity. Francis Foulk has detected this pattern in **A Mid-Summer Night's Dream**[20], and it is certainly present in **As You Like It,** as well as other Shakespearean romantic comedies. And, indeed, more than any other Abdul-Saboorian play, **Now the King is Dead,** comes closest to the spirit of Shakespeare's Romantic comedies.

Act II, which forms the heart of the play, dramatizes, with its densely mythical and ritualistic atmosphere, the organic view of history Abdul-Saboor opposes to the sterile, mechanical, false

one detailed in the first Act. Moreover, the two acts together dramatize the typically romantic conflict between nature and human society, or civilization, and between the view of the poet as a public voice, in the classical tradition, and the status of the poet as free singer and near divine in the Romantic tradition.

In the first Act, when the poet has to tailor his poetry to the demands of his public or his patron he becomes artificial, superficial, stultified, and ultimately futile. This idea is dramatically stressed by the episode of the tailor who loses his tongue when he seeks to sell his art and fashion his best material to the king's demands. His physical mutilation is a concrete metaphor for the poet's artistic and spiritual mutilation. This interpretation is borne out by the fact that the tailor constantly accompanies the poet, even in exile, until the poet finally regains his virility, and his true voice. When this happens, the dumb, mutilated tailor disappears from the scene until the Queen summons him at the end of the play and asks him to stay with her as a reminder of the tyrannical, oppressive past.

From the point of view of dramatic technique, **Now the King is Dead** strikes one as Abdul-Saboor's most versatile play; indeed, it seems a veritable mine of dramatic styles despite its basic simplicity and clear folk-tale pattern. A reference has already been made to the strong presence of Ionesco's absurd drama **Exit the King** in Act I, as well as to the similarity between the play's movement, as a fantastic folk drama, or a folk drama of wonders, and the movement of such Shakespearean folk dramas as **A Mid-Summer Night's Dream** and **As You Like It,** which oppose court and Forest and involve a central ritualistic 'going out' into nature by way of a metaphoric initiation ritual. But apart from Ionesco and Shakespeare, who are strongly present though not named, we find Aristotle and Brecht explicitly mentioned. Indeed, Abdul Saboor manages to make the question of dramatic technique an important issue to the total meaning of the play.

At the beginning of Act I he introduces three women who act as intermediaries between the play and the audience. And at this early stage in the play one cannot quite decide whether they are meant to serve Brecht's or Pirandello's idea of the theatre; i.e., whether they are supposed to create an alienation effect, to relay a particular message, in the Brechtian sense, or introduce the idea of the theatre-in-the-theatre and the relativity of truth in the Pirandellian manner. Soon, however, Brecht imposes and asserts himself in Abdul-Saboor's mocking use of music, and his exaggerated, bombastic use of language which one feels are meant to arouse critical reflection. We see the play unfolding like a parable based on a folk-tale in the Brechtian fashion complete with all the Brechtian effects.

The prose-prologue presented by the chorus of three women at the beginning of Act II strengthens Brecht's technical hold on the play by enforcing the element of critical narration. More importantly, however, it takes up once more, and develops the theme of artistic rebellion, introduced in the prose-prologue which opened Act I. This theme runs through the whole play and merges with political, philosophical and existential rebellion to form an important part of its total meaning. The conflict between the artist and the inherited artistic modes (translated humourously into the conflict between Brecht as the representative of the new experimental spirit in the modern theatre, and Aristotle as the representative of the old, established, and nearly sanctified dramatic formula) re-enacts in the realm of art one of the many variations the play provides on the major and central conflict between life and death. Indeed, the prose parts of the play acted by the chorus form an independent subsidiary play when read together, or, more precisely, a kind of prose-comic sub-plot that runs parallel to the main poetic serious one, in the typical shakespearean manner. It is a sub-plot in which the central figure is at once a comical caricature of the Poet in the main

plot and of Salah Abdul Saboor himself as poet and playwright. Abdul Saboor writes himself explicitly into the play as a 'dark, bespectacled author', slightly stuffy and pompous and a bit clownish. The action of this comic sub-plot consists in the struggles of this mock author to write a play according to the Aristotelian formula. In Act I we are told that this formula (particularly the concepts of catharsis and reversal) puzzles the dark bespectacled author and enslaves him and all the intellectuals who follow it dogmatically without really understanding it or knowing what it is all about. This part comically ends with a recitation from the **Poetics** which is soon drowned by the opening of the main plot. Having puzzled over the function and development of tragedy according to Aristotle's theory in Act I, the mock-chorus and the mock-hero engage in Act II in deciphering the meaning of 'imitation', i.e., Aristotle's concept of the nature of drama. With the beginning of Act III, the action of the comic prose sub-plot reaches its climax: the mock Greek chorus despairingly declare that the author got stuck and urgently needs help; the Aristotelian formula has proved too restricting and, therefore, quite inadequate; it can neither fully contain the poet's vision, nor bring it to a convincing artistic resolution; for while the formula insists that 'a climax should be followed by a sad or happy ending', the mock-author, in total bewilderment now, cannot make up his mind which one to choose. In desperation he refers the matter to the audience and asks them, through the chorus, to settle it for themselves in the light of what they have seen of the play and what they know of their own experience of life, thus opting for Brecht, as the champion of rebellion against the old dramatic formulas, and, indeed, acting more Brechtian than Brecht himself. At the end of the first episode of Act III (the first of the three alternative endings the author provides), the chorus finally name Brecht , and his **Caucasian Chalk Circle** is used to provide the problematic ending to the trip to Hades which the Poet undertakes in search of his Queen. Abdul Saboor, however, takes pains to

stress the folk element in Brecht's theatre by making direct reference to the original Solomon story which Brecht uses as a parable. One feels that, perhaps, it was Brecht's extensive use of folk material and old myths, as well as his revolutionary experimental spirit, more than his Marxist ideology and didactic aims, which attracted Abdul Saboor to his theatre. Indeed, in talking of Brecht, Abdul Saboor, almost in the same breath, pointedly mocks those intellectuals and men of letters who avidly follow the lastest experiments in modern, western literature, and completely ignore their folk literature and traditions; and the mockery serves to underline the basic feature of the new dramatic formula Abdul Saboor was following in the play - namely, the reconciliation of western dramatic theory and practice and eastern folk theatrical norms.

The naming of Brecht, together with all the Brechtian techniques, particularly if one concentrates on the play's topical, social, and political message after Nasser's death, may persuade the reader to regard it, like Brecht's **Chalk Circle,** as a folk-tale used educationally. The political dimension in **Now the King is Dead** is frequently pointed out and has almost become a commonplace. Abdul Saboor's plays, however, often carry a much wider significance since in them he sought to work out not only his political, but also his philosophical dilemmas. There is much more to **Now the King is Dead** than simply the teaching of a lesson or the offering of an indirect political commentary on the period of modern Egyptian history indicated in the title where the word 'King' spells out 'Nasser'. There is also much more to its technique than a mere servile imitation of Brecht.

The play poses several confrontations, apart from the political one, in the realms of art and metaphysics - areas always interrelated in Abdul Saboor's total vision. Political decision and action becomes in this play the free existentialist act that generates one's sense of identity, and an expression of the creative energy

of the artist and the life force which refuse to be contained in dead mechanical formulas, artistic, historical, metaphysical, or moral.

In this play, too, the old opposition between the power of the word and the power of the sword, which tormented Al-Hallaj in his world of moral uncertainty, is resolved by the physical, and "functional" identification of the sword and poet's flute (the poet stabs the executioner with his flute, and blinds him, thus reducing the actual sword to a blind, ineffectual instrument and transforming the flute into the real sword,) and by the subsequent metaphoric transformation of the sword into a phallic symbol - an instrument of love and recreation: it stands conspicuously in view, propped up against the wall of the cottage while the poet and the queen make love inside.

The uncertainty of the results of the choice between logos and praxis, which tormented the hero in the highly charged emotional and moral atmosphere of **Al-Hallaj** gives way here to a kind of intuitive instinctive certainty in the relaxed, pagan atmosphere of the play where vitality is the only positive value conducive to moral good. Indeed, moral sophistry and philosophical equivocation would have been singularly out of place in the simple world of the folk-tale Abdul-Saboor chose.

Now the King is dead adopts the simple and clear moral code which governs all folk-literature the world over. It is a code according to which evil is defined simply as all that makes for barrenness, as a force of destruction; it is all that threatens life, be it a drought sent by the gods, a curse or a spell cast by a witch, or a bad king. Good, on the other hand, is fertility - all that liberates the creative energy in man and nature. This is the simple morality which Abdul Saboor finally opted for in his last play, and one cannot help hoping that the man enjoyed something of its sunny serenity in his last years.

In translating this play I have tried to be at once faithful to Abdul Saboor's text, and to produce a readable, actable version of it in English. The question of tone proved extremely tricky, especially in Act I. It was a sensitive task to try to reproduce in English the delicate balance between broad, even farcical comedy (as when the Vizier pulls at the dying King's legs to let out the black bird of death, for instance, or when the Queen simply asks her husband to wear the famous traditionol horns and provide her with a lover) and moments of deep, moving pathos (as when the King states with touching simplicity, his illusion shattered, "Tis true, we have no child").

Abdul Saboor was a great master of tone; he could, within the space of a few lines, at once savagely ridicule the bombastic, declamatory exaggerations of poetic language, and use such poetic exaggeration to score a point, or achieve flights of poetic fancy of symbolic and metaphoric significance, quite essential to the meaning of the play. My main and constant worry throughout was to avoid falling into the pit of the mock-heroic, or mock-poetic, when the mood was serious, or making the tone serious when the intention was mockery, especially as the play is a tragicomedy in which the two moods are constantly merging. My solution was to try to make the parts in which Abdul Saboor was being deliberately and obviously mock-poetic heavily rhythmical, and to reduce the musicality in the serious parts almost to the level of sober every-day speech, concentrating mainly on the imagery to evoke the intended mood.

Abdul saboor, however, did not make it any easier for me (God forgive him, he had an endearinly impish spirit) since on many occasions I found him using nearly the same image, sometimes mockingly, and sometimes earnestly (e.g., the image of the star is used mockingly in Act I by the tailor to describe the king's men when he says "Tell me my stars of glory", and is again used in the same Act seriously by the king when he describes the

Queen as his one and only star.) However, I did my best to thread my way as translator through the intricate tonal web of the play, and I sincerely hope I have succeeded. It is often said that every translation of poetry involves, of necessity, a measure of treachery. I agree: I have tried to reduce the measure to the absolute bare minimum.

Nehad Selaiha
Cairo, 1986



Notes

(1) For a short review of the history of Arabic poetic drama in Egypt, see M.Enani's Introduction to his English translation of I. Ismail's verse play **The Trial of an Unknown Man,** Egyptian State Publishing House, Cairo, 1985.

(2) "Introduction" to Abdul Saboor's **Night Traveller,** Translated by M.Enani, State Publishing House, Cairo, 1980, p. 7.

(3) The characteristics of this movement, its development and leading figures are fully discussed in Dr. M. Enani's Introduction to his **Anthology of the New Arabic Poetry in Egypt,** state Publishing House, Cairo, 1986.

(4) See A.M. Al-Ghozamy's analysis of the problematic and paradoxical historical-modern implications of the exodus theme in Abdul Saboor's poem entitled **Exodus** in his article "How to Appreciate A Modern Poem", **Fusul,** IV, iv, Aug.-Sept., 1984, pp.97-106.

(5) **Fusul,** II.i., Oct., 1981, pp. 37-51.

(6) In **My Life in Poetry** (Beirut, 1969, p. 114), Abdul Saboor mentions two earlier attempts prior to **The Tragedy of Al-Hallaj.** He abandoned the first because the hero, an Algerian intellectual caught up in the violence and bloodshed of the war of liberation, came too uncomfortably close to Hamlet, and the second, because it seemed unconsciously to arrange itself along the lines of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, with its hero, the Arab poet Al-Muhalhal Bin Rabi'a, growing more

and more reminiscent of Antony. Indeed, Saboor never quite managed to shake off completely Shakespeare's influence. The Bard made too deep an impression on his mind, so that when he came to write his first play, Al-Hallaj, Hamlet was still dogging his hero. In the following plays, Shakespeare is overshadowed by other dramatists-Brecht, Ionesce, Lorka, Maeterlink, to name the most obvious ones; however, he remains deeply buried in the folds of Saboor's language and imagery to surface every now and then with surprising freshness. The influence of Eliot on Saboor has been widely detected and commented on (and Saboor himself drew attention to it by his translations of **Murder in the Cathedral** and **The Cocktail Party**). Shakespeare's influence on Saboor, though equally strong, but, perhaps because more subtle, has received less critical attention. I believe that a statistical study of Shakesperean echoes in Saboor's work is overdue, and could be quite rewarding, particularly since Abdul Saboor set about translating **king Lear** at one time, though he never finished it.

(7) All five plays were successfully staged in Egypt: **Al Hallaj** was performed twice in 1968, once in Alexandria, directed by Hassan Abdul Salam, and again in Cairo, directed by the brilliant Samir Al-Asfouri at the Opera House. The production was later transferred to Wikalat Al Ghouri, a kind of popular open-air theatre, surrounded by an old historical building in the Is amic quarter of El-Hussein in Old Cairo. **A Princess Waiting was** performed at the Avant-garde theatre in Cairo in 1969, directed by Nabil Al-Alfi, who later directed **Now The King is Dead** for the National Theatre in Cairo in 1972. A year earlier, in 1971, Abdul Raḫim Al-Zurqqani had directed **Laila and the Madman** for the Avant-garde theatre. and, at the same theatre, Farouk Zaki directed successively in 1981, and 1982, **Night Traveller** and **A Princess Waiting.**

(8) **Fusul,** II. i,Oct. 1981, p. 128.

(9) As a boy, Abdul-Saboor had a shattering mystical trance. See **My Life in Poetry,** pp. 80-81.

(10) See Abdul-Saboor's note to the play, and **My Life in Poetry,** p.118.

(11) **Fusul,** II, i, Oct., 1981, pp. 133-135.

(12) The similarity between Abdul Saboor and Byron does not stop at the universal quality of the minds of both men; they both had a strong erotic streak which coloured all their responses and mental processes, and both viewed the relation between heaven and earth in terms of a physical union. In Saboor, spiritual passion is translated into sexual imagery, particularly in his last play in the same manner in which Byron's image of existence as a fountain suggests both a phallus and the motion of the sexual act. See my book **Byron's Plays, A Reading in the Context of Modernism,** Egyptian State Publishing House, 1986.

(13) See Nancy Salama, "The Influence of Ionesco on Night Traveller", **Fusul.** II. i. Oct. 1981, pp. 145-151; and Samir Sarhan's Introduction to. Enani's translation of **Night Traveller, op. Cit.**

(14) **Night Traveller,** p. 19

(15) See **My Life in Poetry,** pp. 40-43.

(16) See Isam Bahi "Myth and Folklore in the Dramas of Abdul Saboor", **Fusul,** II. i., Oct. 1981, p. 141.

(17) See Badr Tawfiq, "The Princess between Death and Waiting", **Theatre Magazine,** July-August, 1970. pp. 78-83.

(18) The appearance of the palace and the king's men at the opening of the second episode (or proposed ending) in act

three strongly suggests the bespelled palace in **Sleeping Beauty** with one ironical difference which Abdul Saboor,. with his keen sense of humour, could not have been unaware of: the Sleeping beauty here is not a beautiful princess, but the rotting corpse of the dead king.

(19) The similarity between the first act and Ionesco's play is quite unmistakable and extends from the state of the kingdom in both to the comic antics of the king, the theme of barrenness and depopulation, the fondness of the king for games, as well as to the manner of his death. Indeed, one suspects that Abdul Saboor's choice of title was a deliberate dig at Ionesco's play.

(20) "Dream and Ritual in A Mid-Summer Night's Dream," **Comparative Drama,** 14, 3, Autumn, 1980.



NOW THE KING IS DEAD

A tragi - comedy

in

Three Acts





Act I

(The curtain represents the front of the King's palace and reveals its interior when it opens. The area outside the curtain on the left is occupied by a permanent small setting which represents a river-side scene with a small shack. The play is introduced by a few bars of soft music which replace the three traditional beats. As the audience settle down, the music rises and assumes the character of circus music or, alternatively, a comic opera prelude. Three women bustle out onto the stage from behind the curtain and stand in front of it. They are heavily made-up to suggest stage make-up; they hold typed sheets and conspicuously consult them to give the impression of actresses going over their parts. At a particular musical cue they space out at equal distance from each other. At another musical cue the first begins to speak.)

1 st Woman:

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to you all, and thank you for accepting our invitation. Of course, it wasn't strictly an invitation since all, or rather, most of you have had to pay for admission. There are, perhaps, among you a few lucky ones who have managed to come in free - friends and relatives of the actors or the management of course. They, however, are equally welcome. For whether people pay for their seats or don't is a side issue as far as we are concerned. Your money will not end up in our pockets. Besides, we get paid just the same whether you come or stay away, whether we have a full house or an empty one, whether it is your breath that fills the auditorium or the smell of its wood and stone. The author of our play tonight is a poet by the name of Salah Abdul Saboor - a dark, bespectacled man who dropped in occasionally at rehearsals. Our director is.....

2 nd Woman:

It's always the author and director! They get all the glory if the play is a hit. The critics and reviewers, usually their friends, of course, heap their praises upon them: 'the author has this time surpassed himself,' they say. As for the director, 'he has produced a stunning, breath-taking show,' and so on and so forth. Sounds nice! But what does it mean? And what about the poor actors who do most of the work?! Especially those who, like ourselves, do only small parts! They are either ignored or completely forgotten. We, for instance, play several parts in tonight's play, but all are minor, even our chief one as the king's concubines. We have decided, therefore, with your permission of course, to come on the stage every now and then and address you directly to make up for it. And may we also at the end of the show remind you of ourselves? - that is of course if we feel that you've liked the show and would give us your applause. But if we sense your displeasure and can expect only curses and hisses from you, we shall not intrude upon your presence.

3 rd Woman:

Our play tonight is about the death of a king. Our author, who is addicted to reading rare, old books has stumbled in one of them upon a strange and rather interesting statistical survey. It claims that whereas every minute 39754 ordinary mortals die, only one king dies every eight years and five months. This naturally proves that the death of a king is an exceptional occurrence, an inspiring subject worthy of a poetic play.

1 st Woman:

And this play is about the last king who died eight years and five months ago. Someone may ask: which kingdom did he rule over? A perceptive question!

2 nd Woman:

In fact, the author never told us; but he could have told the director, who might have told the stage-manager whom, actually, we did ask. The stage-manager, however, only said, assuming a very grave tone of voice:

3 rd Woman:

"That king? Ah,.. Yes,.. Well. You could roughly say that he reigned over a big city situated on the banks of a river, with possibly a big sea, or a high mountain nearby. The city was vast, criss-crossed with roads, straight and winding, and dotted over with market places, places of worship, chemist shops, bars, schools, and prisons among other things.

1 st Woman:

The manager also said, quoting the director, who had quoted the author to him, that the king in question ruled for ten years, and that his official chronicler or historian, you will meet him soon, has proved in an excellent piece of research, supplemented by an impressive list of references which include the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Mukhtar Al-Sihah, The Horoscope of the genius of astrologers, and The principles of Home Economics, to quote only a few, and adorned with lithographs documenting the development of the king's signature, as well as lithographs of his identity card, his family card,...etc.. this wise historian has proved that this kingdom, in all its long history, has never known another king, and that his king's name has always been, and in all times, Anobis the First, Gorgias the Ninth, the Son of Toloun the Third, Louis the Thirty-Fourth, Abdul-Rahman the Fifth,....etc.

3 rd Woman:

And since we, ordinary mortals, delight in watching the rise and fall of great persons, the author chose to begin his play with

happy scenes from the king's life. Afterwards he shows him dying and reveals to us what happens after his death so that we can... well,... gloat.

2 nd Woman:

It's a pity Aristotle doesn't mention gloating when he talks of the passions aroused by drama. He only mentions pity and fear forgetting this most beautiful, the gentlest and most fragrant of human passions.

1 st Woman:

And by the way, when we expressed this view to the manager, who at once communicated it to the director, who immediately relayed it to the author, the author strongly objected to our reading of the play and denied that he ever meant us to gloat. Indeed, he reddened, or rather his darkness deepened into blue, and said:

3 rd Woman:

"No, certainly not. I am a man of good manners and sound morals. I never allow myself to harbour a passion like gloating. I refer you to Aristotle's **Poetics,** p. 43. There you will discover what I aim at."

1 st Woman:

We hunted for it high and low. We discovered that all our intellectuals don't even know what it looks like, and all who talk about it have never even read it. Finally we found an old copy at the stall of a dealer in pornographic photos, and we turned to page 43. It said:

2 nd Woman:

The tragic poet shows us great men at the apex of greatness so

that when they suffer a reverse of fortune from happiness to misery, we suffer for them and commiserate with them. The fall of a great man is more moving than the fall of an ordinary man who has never known the taste of happiness and glory......

(The music begins during the recitation from Aristotle. It gradually rises until it drowns the voice of the 2nd Woman who tries to shout out the words above the music in vain. Meanwhile, the curtain rises to reveal a stage divided into two levels. The lower level represents a vast room with a huge throne in the middle. On the same level, up-stage left, a staircase leads to the royal apartments which form the upper level of the multiple setting. The upper level is completely darkened now. The king stands proudly in the middle of the stage; behind him in one straight line stand the Vizier, the Official Historian, the Chief Judge, and the Executioner, all wearing the same attire except for the head gear. All the characters, including the king, are dressed in blue. The director could attach a label to the back of each indicating his profession in the same way as numbers are stuck on the back of football players' shirts.

The music acquires the rythm of a waltz, or any other familiar dance rythm. The three women advance in time to it and range themselves in front of the King and his men. They may be joined by other women, but not more than two or three. The music suddenly stops and the women freeze like wooden marionettes in their final postures. The King motions the 1st Woman to approach. She thaws at once and rushes to him submissively. Throughout the following exchanges between the King and his women the music is used to frame the King's speeches; it stops when he speaks and resumes as soon as he stops to provide an accompaniment to all his gestures. The dialogue alternates in tone between high emotionalism and bombastic declamation. On the whole, it carries the stamp of play-acting. The King puts his arms round the 1st Woman and they begin to dance.)

King : Your breasts are round
Like two upturned cups.

1st Wom. : My lord, if you would deign to touch the cup
The wine will flow and wet your gentle tips,
Or proudly rush into the bliss of your good eye,
And turn to dew to moist the petals of your lips.

King · Your body breaks under my touch and softly sways;
In melting rythms it responds and undulates
Like a field slumbering in the cosy warmth of a bleached winter morn.

1st Wom. : My lord, blow your breath into my pores,
A playful wind to shake my fruit,
Then gather them in all their ripeness in your hands,
And place your palms on me to light the midnoon sun
under my dress.
My flesh will melt and luxuriate,
Drinking in the rich blaze.
And afterwards in grateful joy will lie
Like a field that has been ploughed
And wearily sleeps in the rosy flush of a summer sunset.

King : Your thighs are pillars that mark the way to the hidden spring
Which, in rapt absorption, contemplates its own majestic, august splendour
In the depths of its own mirror.

1st Wom. : My lord, Pan-like, into the magic woods steal,
And pointing your sharp silver arrow descend
Into my rosy thickets,
A welcome guest into the land of shadows and moonlight,
The land of eternal silence, and hanging mists,
And forge your way to the secret well,

And pierce its mirror-like surface with your arrow,
To divert it from contemplating its own sublimity.

(The King abruptly stops and pushes the woman away. She stiffens at once like a wooden doll.)

King : God! The dreary boredom of it all! Like a cheerless desert!
We've said all this before;
We've repeated those same cold, slithering words
Yesterday, the day before, and every day.
Go back to your place.
Summon the Poet.

Poet : My lord!

King : Why do you suppose I feed and clothe you?
You gorge yourself at my expense, just like a snake,
And utterly cloyed, you then collapse.
You pour my wine down your throat as if you were a parched soil.
I order ink and pen and paper for you,
And outings to the sea,
So that you could entice your muse, or demon,
Or spirit of inspiration, or whatever you call it.
I even let you sleep all day, till after noon,
Something I don't allow any of my men.
Why do you suppose I do all this?

Poet : My lord is ever bountiful, and I am ever thankful.

King : Wrong. I am not that stupid,
To give and expect no return.
I over stuff you full of food and wine
That you may throw up poetry equal to our bounty.
Do you remember what you said when you first came into our royal presence?
Remember what you said, in a near collapsing voice
When first you joined my court?

You looked emaciated like a desert locust,
And filthy like a shoe....

Poet **(protesting weakly)**
My lord, not quite as filthy as all that.

King : Oh! So you do not like my simile!
Well, teach us then the right one for something appallingly filthy.
But never mind.
Do you remember what you said?

Poet : I do my lord.

King : And so do I.
You stumbled in your words and said:
My fellow poets would mock me,
And when they meet would say I beg a livelihood with verse.
Besides, the critics of this age declare
That they despise the poet who bestows his verse on princes,
And so forth.... A lot of such nonsense you stammered to which I paid no attention.
For what care I for flattering words that would soon melt into thin air?!
I won't sneak into the pageant of history like a beggar in tattered rags
Smeared with blotches of bad verses....
I therefore paid no note to what you said. I said,
I did not bring you here to sing my praise;
A friendly voice is what I need
To make me feel that I.... that I..... that I.....
I am a burdened man, you see;
I have no time to live as people do,
Enjoy myself as commoners do.
I had no need for verses in my praise;
I needed your romantic verse, poems of love

to sooth away my aches and pains.
I wanted one to teach me how to sing of love, my women too,
So that I could become refreshed and feel as others do.
I asked round; they said
You were the best who wrote erotic verse,
And so I sent for you.

Poet : And you've been satisfied with my verses, good my lord,
As they flowed from your lips or tripped on the tongue of a concubine.

King : I am not now.
You've been repeating the same old words,
Ideas and images.
Couldn't you come up with something better than this lifeless stuff
And teach it to the woman?
For two long weeks we have been saying this:
Like two upturned cups...My lord...Like two upturned cups,....My lord.....

Poet : I beg your pardon Sire,
But I did teach the other one a new dialogue
Which may perhaps answer your royal wish.

King : Always perhaps and may!..
You're never sure!..
We'll see. You there come here.

(The 2nd Woman springs to life suddenly. The music swells. The King looks her over and beams. They begin to dance. The woman hums with the music.)

Poet : **(prompting the King in a low voice)**
Like to the tinkling of a silver bell, unique,
Your notes, so pure, descend, as if trickling from a tower

Clad in a mantle of blue clouds.

King : Like to the tinkling of a silver bell, unique,
Your notes, so pure, descend, as if trickling from a tower
Clad in a mantle of blue clouds.

2nd Wom. : My notes grow clearer when I warble in your silvery folds;
They grow fainter and purer like the echo of drops of rosy wine
As they drip when the crystal cup is full.
Take me! Oh, take me my lord!

Poet : **(interrupting in alarm)**
: No, no! not yet. You've spoilt the whole thing!
You've skipped the best part.
Do forgive me my lord.

(To the Woman)
: Before that you talk about your larynx and how violin-like
Its strings crave the touch of my good lord's luminous fingers.
There is besides the bit about your eyes.
You close them as you sing
And tell my lord that you so burn
And long for him to lie enfolded in their warm and honeyed waves.
And after that my lord should say
That your footfalls so sound like music as it beats into the artist's head.
At this you cry:
Then scatter them my lord onto the scales of your desire.
And after that, in a halting voice, breaking up with throaty moans, you, trembling, beg:
Take me my lord.

King : Damned luck!
I do so like the words this time.
It's just my luck this silly woman has forgotten them.
Nothing ever happens according to plan, and the good days once over never come back.

(The King turns to summon the 3rd Woman. As she is about to come to life, the Herald, a hunch-back pigmy, rushes in.)

Herald : **(loudly, his voice producing an echo)**
: **My lord....ord....ord.... The royal tailor begs admission.. mission...mission....into your presence... essence... essence.... to display....play-....play....play.... some of....**

King : All right, all right, let him in
Just for a minute.
But tell me clown,
Do you have a wife?

Herald : What use would I be to a wife, my lord? What would she see in me?

King : Your position at court; your place near me.

Herald : What matters to a wife at night,
When limbs are touching and desire requires response,
Is my place near her, not near my lord.

King (Laughing, motions to the second woman to approach. She coldly advances towards the Herald):

Clown,
Take this woman for your wife.
You will like her when you know her as she is,
When familiarity breeds affection.

Herald : But will she like me, my lord?

King : Never mind that. Women are never content;

One day they like their husbands, the next not.
Appease her when she grumbles, clown.

Herald: : I cannot do it; pardon me, my lord.
I have no one to plead my case,
Or win her back if she rejects me.

King : Woe to you, you miserable clown!
Do you refuse my gift?
Perhaps you think it is far less than you deserve!

Herald : Indeed, far more than I deserve, or can cope with.
Look here, my lord.
Suppose I could ascend this here upright leg,
What would I do, or could, with this here curving thigh?
Or what's above? - this rounded mound,
The quivering breasts,
The long, high neck,
The burning cheeks,
The shooting lights of those eyes..
No, no... My lord,
I am not worthy of her.

King : But is that all? A simple-matter indeed.
In bed, you should not let her lie beside you like a straight spear,
But, like a piece of paper, fold her up.

Herald : This might require that you yourself should lie with us
To order her, for only then would she obey.

King : And I agree.
But now call in my tailor.
No, wait. Can you spare us a moment of your time, Chief Judge?

Judge : At your service, my lord.

King : Marry this slave to this slave-girl at once.

Judge : May I remind my lord of his decree
That all marriages are to be contracted in the House of Justice?

King : What is all this, you blasted judge!
I own the state,
Therefore, I am the state, everything and every-one,
The court, the treasury, and the seat of wisdom;
I am the temple, and the hospital, and the jail,
The cemetery too;
I am the one and all.
You are but mortals, passing shadows, vague, imperfect forms;
I am the substance and the sacred essence.
(Pointing to himself)
The marriage is to take place here, in the House of Justice.

Judge : A glorious ruling, most glorious King.
One far beyond my week, dim wits.
Your inventive genius for legislation invariably breaks down the defences of the law.
May I record it, Sire?
I will write a paper on it for my legislative Encyc-lopaedia.
(Gathers up his papers hastily.)

King : Wait here, you shameful judge of ill report!
Rather than vulgarly spit out your transparent flattery in my face,
Do as I say. Marry this couple. The registration of the contract can wait.

Judge : Whatever you say my lord.
(He looks at the Herald and the concubine and motions them to approach. They stand before him.)

I hereby pronounce you man and wife.
I hereby pronounce you man and wife.
I hereby pronounce you man and wife.

King : Now call the tailor clown,
And take this woman in your wake.
(the clown and the woman cross the stage in front of the King on their way out. The King scrutinizes them and realizes the discrepancy between their appearances; he calls them back before they go off-stage.)
Come back here clown.
(To himself)
Oh dear! If only my aesthetic principles weren't so strict and unrelenting!
The proportions are all wrong, completely flawed.
You shameful judge,
Divorce those two, and keep the woman for the tailor,
For he is somewhat taller

Judge **(making the couple stand before him repeats):**
: I hereby declare this marriage null and void.
I hereby declare this marriage null and void.
I hereby declare this marriage null and void.

King : Well, that's that. Now go and call the tailor, clown.

Herald : My lord will not forget
That he has promised to be my wedding guest one day.

King : I will not, clown.
You're never content or discontented.
I like that about you.
Perhaps, deep down, you do not really care;
You know not what some call

Honour, or something of the sort.

Herald (exits calling)

: The tailor....or....or...may enter...ter....ter-...ter....

(The tailor dashes in, almost at a run, and suddenly comes to a halt before the King. He starts to pinch his thighs and cheeks.)

Tailor : Tell me my lords,
You stars of glory,
Am I asleep or awake?
Am I truely in the presence of our lord, the full moon incarnate?
I can't be sure no matter how hard I pinch myself,
For his glorious light blinds my marvelling eyes.

King **(smiling)**
Why don't you slap yourself as well,
If you so want to be assured?
Or better still, may I slap you?

Tailor (advancing his cheek)

: Honour this cheek my lord.

King : Your face, or should I rather say two faces don't appeal to me, or tempt me.
One you show, and one you hide.
But both are ugly, and wrinkled.
It is beneath me to slap a face well-used to slapping.
I only slap a face that has not been struck before.
Oh dear! If only I hadn't this weakness for human frailty!
(Turning the tailor's head from side to side)
Keep your head. It's enough that I know I can turn it like a spindle when I want.
What brings you here today?

Tailor : My lord,
My brother-in-law, the tailor of the Western Prince,
Has sent me a length of velvet,
White in colour, soft and downy.
As soon as I beheld it,....Ah! And what a moment that was my lord!
My heart leapt up and knocked against my ribs.
In amorous rapture, I reached out a trembling hand
To stroke it, as the gentle breeze fondles the branches.
But as it rested on the downy nap,
A violent tremor ran through my burning frame,
And something coursed through my veins, like blood when the fever moves it.
Shyly it opened up under my wary touch,
For in my palm I felt, under the grayish down, a few hairs rearing up and pulsing warmly.
I shook more violently, and in dazed, breathless wonderment,
I bent to put my lips to it, but, all at once, it shrank away and said:
A virgin still am I and have not yet draped myself on mortal legs.

King : The length of velvet said all this?

Tailor: : That is what I heard, my lord, with my own ears. I swear.
To her words I replied:
Far too valuable, O, thou art, to drape yourself on mortal forms
Creatures of blood and dust.
Light can only blend in harmony with brighter light.

I shall, therefore, carry you at once to a moon in fulness shining bright, to you, my lord.
At this it went speechless and trembled shyly.

King : You do not say?! It went speechless?!

Tailor : Indeed my lord, it did;
It went speechless and a quiver ran through the smooth and sleepy down.
But soon it said:
My lord has a long and chronicled romantic history,
And I am but green, and know nothing of the art of love.
I said: fear not, leave this to me.
Tonight, with my artist's scissors I will fondle you,
And smooth your limbs,
And dig into your waist
Until the curves bulge, until the smooth skin glows with the burning sweat.
At this, she swept down to the floor, and at my feet implored.
Shape me, I beg of you,
So that my aching flesh and my sore heart,
Could find relief in touching him, the lord of love,
For nearly torn apart am I, with such deep longing!
But I did not. I brought her just as she is, a green, untouched virgin.
If you like her, my lord, then put her in my care for a day or two,
Until she ripens.

King : A tailor by profession,
And speaks like a pimp or a slave-dealer!

Show it to me.

Tailor : Extend your hand to her, my lord.
Look kindly upon her.

King **(trying to suppress his admiration)**
: Not bad. And the design?

Tailor : Here it is my lord.

King : With all your chatter I almost forgot;
Our official colour is the blue.

Tailor : Make it white, my lord
As from this year.

King : You mean go back to white once more?
Well, let us at first consult with our official historian.

Hist. : At your beck and call my lord.

King : When did we have white as the state's official colour?

Hist. : During the first two hunderd years of your glorious reign, my lord.
(In a whisper)
I mean the first two years.
The slogan of the state was then:
Wear white on the outside,
You grow white inside.

King : And why did we choose it?

Hist. : Let me see... Allow me to consult my papers Sire.
Ah, we advocated then the wiping of the slate of memory clean;
White oblivion
To lay the ghosts of the past in white shrouds;
To face up to the challenge of the future armed with a white idealogy.

King : What colour did we choose next?

Hist.________**(consulting his records):**

: Brown, my lord.
The state slogan then declared:
Attire yourself in brown,
A true patriot you become up and down
Some people had failed to rise to the occasion in those historical moments,
To let bygones be bygones and live for tomorrow.
These were a few impotent, good-for-nothing, book-worms and schizophrenics,
Who started urging us to look back in anger.
We thought the past too insignificant for that,
And since we had no stomach for black hate,
We settled for a brown one by way of compromise.

King : And when was it we changed to blue?

Hist : In the last century my lord
(Whispering)
That is, last year, my lord.

King : Year or century, it doesn't matter.
No one believes your silly drivel any way, except you yourself of course.
And why did we choose it?

Hist. : The winds of good fortune had spread the banner of the state over the seas till the edge of the horizon.
And his majesty's name could be seen everywhere
Inscribed in glowing letters of light,
On the pale blue mantle of the moon,
Or on the clouds that drape the sky in blue.
And so, the slogan of the state became:
In blue dress yourself,
Nearer the Absolute you find yourself.

King **(to the Tailor)**

: All right. Show me the design you prepared.
If it appeals to me, we will replace the blue with white.
What does our Vizier think of this?

Viz. **(looking around him as if he has suddenly woken up)**
Is my lord addressing me?

King : Come and look and give us your views.
This tassel on the chest... what do you think?
Would it look better higher near the neck?
And what is this? Embriodery?... No, no...
It would look more elegant on the sleeves than on the pockets,
Far prettier, don't you think? What do you think?

Viz. **(looking long and closely at the design):**
Whatever you see my lord.

King : I'm asking you: on the sleeves or on the pockets?

Viz. : What you said just now my lord.

King : Oh! you are so thick! Go back to your place.
Remind me one day to order you
To kill yourself.

Viz. : I shall, my lord.

King : I like the design with my alterations.
Gentlemen,
As from this year, white will be the state's official colour.
Manage your affairs accordingly,
And communicate this royal ordinance to all the clerks and superintendents of the State.
As for you, our official historian,
You have to think up something brief and new by way of a slogan for the state;
The general purport should be

Something to the effect
That we choose white a symbol of the happy and loving extinction of the self
Into a state of total harmony.
We have sunk the self into the common good and merged into each other until we grew white and agnel-like,
Eternally dying into the universal white absolute,
The Royal white absolute.

Hist. : Yes, my lord.

King **(to the tailor)**
: And now, what are you waiting for?

Tailor : For the bounty of the rare ornament of this universe.
O, make it wear a golden hue my lord.

King : No, a silver one.
Executioner,
Off with the head of this villain.
Put your sword to his neck.

Tailor : Have mercy on me, Sire.
Forgive me if I did offend with words,
I did not mean it.
I meant well; let that intercede for me.
I want no reward; your appreciation of my taste is more than enough reward.
Your kindness equals all the treasures of the earth.

King : Executioner, hurry up.

Tailor **(to the Executioner)**
: Be gentle with my head, man. Give me sometime
To feast my eyes on my lord's face.
(To the King.)
You're only making fun of me my lord, aren't

you?
How lovely are your practical jokes!
I would enjoy them were I not a chicken-livered dunce.
Do look at me, my lord!
How like a cat with a burning tail I quake!
(Shakes violently in front of the King)
Why don't you laugh at me my lord, and let your sweet mouth shine?
Woe to me! Why don't you laugh my lord?
Tell me my masters,
Is he really angry?
Have I said something wrong?
I know I do sometimes, unawares.

King : Executioner, hurry up.
Tailor : My head is yours my lord.
If I could cast if off as one slips off a shoe I would
Contentedly submit to your majestic will.
I only want to know before my death
Wherein I did displease my lord.

King : My pleasure or displeasure has nothing to do with this;
It is a question of state policy.
We have to pluck your vulgar, worthless head
In order to protect the dearest thing we have:
The dignity and majesty of the King's office.
We will not risk your going out of here,
Your empty head bursting with vainglorious bubbles,
Thinking that you inspired me, the King, to change the symbol and the slogan of the state.
I will not have you brag of this to some female you keep at home,

As you two lie in bed between the threadbare sheets,
By way of interludes between the acts of fornication,
For then, she would, in turn, relay it to her stupid neighbours,
Hanging down over her dusty, grimy window-sill like some slimy mucous.
And who should know but that you would one day in a bar
Begin to boast to boon companions over drinks.
Executioner,
Take away his design, and then his head.

Tailor : My lord,
Have mercy on my kids.
They are your subjects too.
Have mercy on me for their sake, they will be lost, all five of them.
I beg you on my knees, my lord;
I throw myself at your feet and lick them like a dog.

King : Oh, dear! If only I hadn't this weakness for family-life!
My heart, like yours, bleeds for you.
But duty calls on me
To do what I see right.
Oh, dear! If only I hadn't such a strong sense of duty!

Tailor : I won't speak, my lord,
I swear I won't.
Indeed, I will not say another word again as long as I live.
I will be dumb.

King : I have an idea!

Executioner, let go his head,
And pluck his tongue, by the roots.
Out of his throat,
To guard the state from its blabbing.
Now, go. At once.
(Executioner exits dragging the Tailor)
We thank our gracious Lord
For having blessed us with the right decision.
And now,
My friends,
Managing the state's affairs has quite tired us all.
I shall, therefore, and by your leave, withdraw to the royal apartments,
There to see our beloved wife and queen.
How long is it till dawn?

Hist. : A few hours, my lord.

King : I will be back at dawn.
(To the Women)
You, go and eat and sleep,
And learn your songs
Until tomorrow noon.
(To the rest)
But you stay here till I return;
For something may occur to me,
or I may need your help in some matter or other.

(The light dims in the throne hall silhoutting the King's men while the King advances to the silver staircase leading to the upper level and climbs it to the tunes of soft music. At the top of the stairs, he opens a door which leads into the faintly lighted bedroom of the Queen.

The Queen lies on a bed draped in grey sheets and hangings, her head propped up against grey pillows, her hair hanging down limply and framing her pale face. The dim light accentuates her

pallor. She gives the impression of a long sick or bed-ridden person. She does not seem to pay any attention to the King as he enters the room and starts to shed off some of his clothing. The King sits on a chair next to the bed and speaks in a gentle, affectionate voice that contrasts sharply with his tone in the previous scene.)

King : My one and only star, forgive me.
My star who slumbers in ethereal heights.
Have I kept you waiting long? The state's affairs delayed me.
But here I am at last. Do you know that every time I turn the handle of this door to let myself inside,
I feel as if a soft breeze
Has saved me from a storming, foaming sea,
And on her gentle palms has brought me here
To rest on the shores of your green lake,
Your clear and kindly eyes.
How nice and comforting it is for a burdened man
To be able to shed off his loads,
In the single flash of an eye, by just taking one stride!
Have you had some rest? Is the child asleep?
Do you know? I fear we spoil him far too much;
And pampering, like sweets, could be harmful in excess.
Day and night he nestles under your wing.
Why don't you give him every now and then
Into the care of a nurse or a servant?
There, there...
Laugh, laugh, my toothless child!
Laugh to make the roses bloom in your cheeks.
Come on, give me a smile. There, there....
Oh, what a lovely smile!
Had your dinner and feeling happy? Is he wet?
(He feels the clothes of an imaginary child)

No, no don't cry! Your face creases when you do,
And wears the look of someone old and weary.
Was he troublesome today?

Queen : Oh, no! He has been gentle as the breath that softly heaves and drops;
Would deeply fall asleep until the rippling light suffused his dewy face,
And then wake up, and skip about, like a gull upon the waves;
Sometimes, with a reckless finger, he would poke my breast
To indicate his need for something of the food of love,
And sip his fill of the heart's nectar,
And when content, relax into a soft sleep.
His disposition is sweetly gentle on the whole.

King : Takes after you in this
Like the rose which bears something of the nature of the branch that gives it birth.

Queen : At cerain moments, though, I fear his eyes.
Sometimes they wear that look of yours
When your eyes fill with supercilious pride and contemptuous suspicion.

King : He is my boy, as well, you know?
I hope that when the time arrives for him to leave the shelter of your arms
And come under my wings,
He will absorp what I impart,
And grow to be like me.

Queen : No! Oh, no! I mean you are unique.
I hope he'll only be himself.
You know, sometimes I see him in my mind's eye rising above the hills of time,
A glorious youth, at full noon-tide,
A clear unclouded sun,

Shining upon the world, eternally pouring light,
Renewing it as it disperses.
An everlasting smile....

King : No one can smile for ever.

Queen : No, perhaps you're right.
Sometimes his face is overcast with light clouds of worry and anxiety.
But he bears no grudge, harbours no malice.
He's as full of forgiveness, as brimming with tolerance as a bee is with nectar.
That is why the transient clouds soon clear up.
They never thicken into deep dark furrows, or dampen his spirits.
(Addressing the imaginary child)
What did you say? You know we are discussing you?
You didn't like what I said?
Is that why you have dug your rosy heel into my side?
(Bends to kiss an imaginary heel)

King : How right you are! What a lovely foot!
One day it will trample on your subjects necks
My royal child.
(Kisses the imaginary foot)

Queen : He will grow up to be a kindly king, beloved of all.

King : You mean he will be weak, despised by all;
A toy in the hands of his courtiers;
A joke on the tongues of his subjects; the butt of mockery and ridicule;
A name splashed about in bars and spilt with wine,
Then flung into the streets with the rubbish and discarded with the refuse,
And used to feed the dying embers on their hookahs;
The target of the mob's impudent wit,
Which bares their ill intent.
No......A god he will be in human form.

I'll teach him how to look accusingly into the eyes of men,
And pore so long until the limbs of his opponent grow so weak
That he collapses at his feet, and kisses them,
And ask his pardon for a crime he never really did commit.

Queen : Opponent, did you say?
I do not think a kindly king who governs well would have opponents.

King : Of course he would. All-men naturally oppose the man at the top.
When he is old enough to learn, I'll have to take him in my care. It is a must.

Queen : Oh, no!
You can't take him away from me!
What would I have to live for then?
What reason would I have to breathe if my breath could not mist over the mirror of his face?
How could I live without him beside me at night
Without feeling my budding life open up and come to flower at his tender touch?

King : With you, he'll learn nothing.

Queen : I'll teach him wisdom.

King : Ah! Like our dear official historian?

Queen : And poetry.

King : Are we going to educate him to be a tramp or a king?

Queen : A king, a humane king.
You never told me of your early days.
Did you love your parents?

King : Naturally. At first.
But as I grew up, and my visions of glory swelled,
I began to disapprove of them in so many ways:
Their humble hopes and modest ambitions;

Their elegantly disguised penury, masquarading as austerity.
They were a type I do not like...
The hesitant, irresolute type....
Just ordinary.

Queen : Were you fond of music.

King : I was, still am.

Queen : What sort of music?

King : Dancing music and military marches.

Queen : Can you hear the music playing now?

King : What music? Where?

Queen : I hear it clearly. Can't you hear it yet?
Listen....
It's the night's enchanted music.
Welcome! Welcome! I haven't heard you for so long!
It has so long deserted me until I thought our past encounters
Were nothing but a dream.
But here it comes again, trickling in through the shutters,
Sailing in on the moon's silver beams.
Look!
The sad blue tunes are clinging to the curtains over there,
While the rosy notes of joy
Are dancing round the dimly lighted lamp.
And look! Here is a fugitive tune,
A baby, not yet grown.
Quick my baby tune, and join your friends.
Let not the silence overtake and suck you in...
Take care! The silence nearly got you.
Join the ring my baby tune and dance.
Thank God! They are united now.
How sweetly they all dance, the blue tunes

melting into the rosy ones.
Swell, and rise. Dash to the top
You choir of the night's enchanted music,
You happy joyful tunes.
Will you allow my weak and shivering voice
To join in your song and dance with you?
(She sings melodiously, her eyes wearing a dreamy look)

King : Not so loud, please.
You may disturb the child.

Queen : The child! What child?
You know very well we have no child.
This is an empty bed in which illusions only move:
Illusory arms, illusory legs....
This is a child of words.
Have you believed the game?
What a trick time has played on us! The words have grown
Into shadows and ghosts.
But, alas, the icy words cannot be turned
To warm flesh and blood!
We have no child.
We have no child.
(She weeps)

King **(in gentle resignation):**
: 'Tis true my one and only star;
We have no child. All right. But what of that?
The fates denied us one, and so we lived two free and happy birds.
We created this illusion only to add to our happiness, to renew it.

Queen: : Two birds?!
What use are wings if a bird cannot fly?

King : Well, not birds, but shoots, two green and tender shoots.

Queen : Two shoots?!
Where then are the fruits?

King : Oh, my hidden treasure!
We were so happy with our imaginary child!

Queen : The child of hopelessness.

King : And yet, I was content.

Queen : And so was I,
Until the night music took me unawares, and ripped off my illusions.
When she is here, I have to face her naked.
Oh, my mistress! Music of the night!
Give me back my child!
Oh, give him back to me!
Or let me have another!
(Bursts into tears)
Let me take a lover.

King : What?!

Queen : Anyone you choose,
As long as he can plant a seed.
I will not look into his face,
Or gaze into his eyes, or feel his forehead, or touch his hair.
I will be rugged, unresponsive, like a rough terrain.

King : No, no! This is mad, and unfair!

Queen : Either you find me one who would give me a son,
Or set me free to roam the earth.
(Gets up from the bed)

King : Unfair! Unfair
You are my woman, my treasure, my shady resting place, my shelter and my home,
My good-luck charm, my golden lucky star.
Ten years ago tonight I saw you

Rising up like a silver spring from the depths of the river,
Covered only in the shadows of the bending willow trees.
What dowery do you ask, you mistress of the thousand moons? I asked.
Your lips softly murmured:
My dowry is to love me, to give me a kingdom that no words of man can ever describe.
That night, I got your dowry with my sword,
A kingdom that stretches the whole length of your river.
And then I carried you off to my palace in full honour,
And shut you away so that no human eye could so much as glimpse the hem of your robe.
I gave you a kingdom for a dowry.

Queen : A kingdom, but no child.
A past, and no future.

King : True. I could not give you that.
The all-powerful king is powerless when it comes to giving his woman a child!

Queen : Choose a man to fill my womb.

King : To fill your womb today, and the earth's tomorrow.

Queen : What do you mean?

King : I'll kill him when his cursed task is done.

Queen : No, you cannot kill a man when he has given me a flower.
Let him loose to roam the earth.

King : This is solely up to me. Tell me my only treasure,
Do you really care so much about the child?
Would it make us happier?
Would it make you leave your lonely, wakeful bed?

Queen : Not only will I shun the stagnant bed,
But I will walk and dance, and dance while walking.

Indeed, I'll soar up high,
And love you a thousand times more.
My tenderness will overflow and drench your days in fragrant light.
Oh! Won't you order me a child!

King : I'll have to think about it first.
(The King suddenly collapses into a chair looking extremely tired. He gazes fixedly in front of him and speaks as if addressing an apparition.)

King : You're here at last!
How I have longed for you!

Queen : The child?

King : No. Death.
You're here on time, exactly. Come, black bird of death!
Softly sneak into my limbs.
I bare my chest to let you peck your way into my heart.
My lady, summon the notables of the state.
(The Queen gets up languidly and rings a silver bell that hangs by the bed three times. The King's officials walk in sleepily rubbing their eyes and stand in a row)

king **(pulling himself up with great effort)**

: My lords, notables of the state,
Pay your last respects
To your departing King,
As befits his rank and position.
For now, from the vast and gloomy regions of the fates,
The black bird of death has swooped down on him.
(Writhing in agony)
Don't peck at my eyes!
Don't stab me with your thorny beak I beg you.
Slip inside me, sweetly, gently; for I will not resist

Thank you. He's now in my head, flapping his mighty wings;
Now in my navel,
Now slithering down to my legs.
Is he looking for an exit there?! If only he would leave this time!
For I have suffered long enough this lethal torment!
(To the Vizier)
Adjure him to leave me Sir.

Vizier : **(Kneelng at king's feet and pulling at them, he tries in vain to force the bird out)**
My lord!

King : Oh Now he's going up again!
Oh! The agony of the flapping wings and piercing beak!
What's come over you? Why do you stand there like ghosts?
Do something. You, with your aphorisms and maxims, and you with your Verses!
You, with your prayers and charms,
Can't any of you do something?!
Slay the black bird of death!
This is a royal command.

Exec. **(pulling out his sword)**
: Where is he my lord?

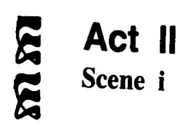
King : No, no. We have no need of swords.
It is all over now anyway.
I only wish to God, to the devil too,
That he would lie still, in peace.
Ah! Now he is nestling in my heart.
Leave him there; let him alone.
I won't have him flapping his wings again and disturbing my blood.
I am grateful death has finally

Relieved me of my burdens.
(Collapses back and dies.)

Queen **(stands in the middle of the room beside the King's corpse and scrutinizes him as if to make sure he's really dead. She then turns aside and whispers to herself):**
Now, I'll have a child.
I'll have a child.
I'll have a child.

Curtain





Act II

Scene i

(Setting: same as Act I. 1st Woman, 2nd Woman, and 3rd Woman come out from behind the curtain and face the audience.)

1st Woman:

Ladies and gentlemen, the rituals of death differ from one country to another. Dont't worry, we don't intend to bore you here with a lesson in anthropology, a science which, by the way, has at the moment become quite fashionable and supplanted psychology or psycho-analysis in the affection of the snobs. It studies the customs of man and his rites. In India, for instance, they burn their dead; in certain places in Africa, they eat them. We, on the other hand, treat them as newly-weds, and send them off as if they were going on a honey-moon trip. But in the city we're talking of they had a rather curious custom.

2nd Woman:

They dressed their dead in their best clothes and for forty days let them lie on their soft or hard beds while their friends and relatives, their nearest and dearest, went round and round them, and in the sweetest, gentlest words urged them to recover their ebbing strength and drive out of their bodies the black bird of death.

3rd Woman:

They tempted them with the pleasures they valued most in life, food or drink, clothes or furniture, forms of passtime and entertainment. They would offer a dead man, for instance, his favourite meal or wine, or dope, or display before him his saddle,

or his woman's underwear in the hope that some unfulfilled desire, still lurking in his soul, might urge him to pluck up his strength and expel the bird.

1st Woman:

The poor, of course, were never tempted, and never woke up. Indeed, the more they were reminded of their former life, the deeper was their death. But if the dead man happns to be a King..... Who knows? There is usually a great deal to tempt a king back.

2nd Woman:

When the curtain rises you will see the king lying on his bed. We naturally do not mean to frighten you with the sight of a corpse, for we know that people somehow fear the dead far more than the living, which is, indeed, a serious mistake. However, our business here is not to correct you or teach you to be better and wiser; our business is mimesis, as the stage-manager told us, quoting the director who had quoted the playwright who had quoted Aristotle. For a very long time ago, Aristotle declared that the object of all art was imitation.

3rd Woman:

And the meaning of imitation has never been simple or quite clear. It has, in fact, always puzzled the critics and made some wonder whether art should be an exact copy, a replica of life. But how could that be? Life is a humdrum affair, full of loose ends while art is always neatly ordered and complete. Life is often vague, haphazard, and meaningless, while every work of art has its own inherent significant logic. Imitation, therefore, as a word seems quite inadequate, or may be it is an unhappy translation of some old Greek word which neither I, nor any-one else in our country knows. For most of those who claim to know Greek in our country don't know Aristotle's dead Greek which, by the

way, is completely different from Greek as it is spoken now in Greece and which some of you pick a smattering of through long acquaintance with Greek bar-tenders, waiters, stock-brokers...etc.

(The curtain rises gradually during the 3rd Woman's speech and the music plays a mock-funereal march. On the upper level of the set, the king lies in state. On the staircase leading down, various members of the court sit in sombre silence. On the lower level, the King's women stand in a row, looking like wooden marionettes. The music gradually assumes dancing rhythms and the women begin to chant while they dance.)

Women : We implore the sleeping noble one,
In the name of the good old days,
To shake off his slumber,
And return from the setting star.
For we, the pleasures of his life, await him:
The warmth of the dance, the song, and the kiss.
We are the heated blood that races in the veins, the sap of life, fresh and cool.
Like perfume bottles, when uncovered, our fragrance awakens deep longings
For life's pleasures,
For singing, dancing, kissing.

Viz. : What a pity his eyes are closed!
He cannot see you.
I do not know what else you could do.

Hist. : They could go near him and address him. May be he'll hear.
They could remind him of some hidden charms
Which they revealed to him in private.

Viz. : Go up to him, one at a time.

Poet : I fear we are clinging to a mere illusion.
I have never in my life seen a bird leave a corpse.

Judge : A sceptical heretic!
When the gardener goes away, the worms of the earth crawl out to play!
Girls,
Do as the vizier says.
You, go first....
Perhaps his majesty still remembers something of your mirth and conviviality
And hankers after it.
If he responds, he might open his mouth and let the bird come out

Ist Waman (Climbs the stairs dancing.
The Judge's eyes follow her avidly. She stops in front of the corpse):
Remember me my lord?
You used to call me when we were alone a blithe spirit, a merry breeze.
Do you remember how you used to gather all my golden locks into your hands
And mount my back as if I were a nag?
How we did romp and rock with laughter!
Rise, my lord.! You'll find me still quicker and nimbler than the blink of an eye.

Viz. (Goes up and examines the King):
: Skilful as she is, she failed. You try...
Not you, the dark one beside you
You were closest to the King's heart before he died.

3rd Woman: Remember me my lord?
: Your blazing river of flames you called me.
You used to say
Only a demon could quench this woman's thirst.
I would hold you until you melted in my arms
Like molten gold.

And then, how we would laugh!
Rise up my lord and throw your royal weariness into me,
Your blazing brazier.

Poet : You know very well
His majesty loved women as he loved perfume, no more.
He sniffed at them, but never inhaled.
He did his best to keep his dagger sharp
Only to use the cutting edge for killing time.

Viz. : Shut up, you!
The King will rise one day and chastise your impudence.

Hist. : The King was fond of jems and golden trinkets.
Let us show him some of his valuables,
Or make him hear the rustling of his golden chains and pendants.

Viz. (to the Herald)
: Go and fetch the coffer here.

Judge : Let the women dance. Come on, dance!
Let the stairs sway with your intricate footwork,
For he loved to watch the spots of coloured light
Shine on your bare skin and make it glow serpent-like.
You, quiver like a fish in water.
And you, bend backwards and arch yourself like a bridge on a river.
Goooood! You there! Open your arms as if you're about to receive
His luminous majesty. Now fold them as if you're hugging
The waves of joy that swept over you at the royal touch.
(Watches the woman, completely enthralled.)
Look at her my lord!

(Herald enters carrying the coffer.)

Herald : The royal coffer....offer....offer....

Viz. **(Carries the box to the dead King, opens it and begins to display its contents. Places some jewels near the dead hands, then rattles the gold in time to the music):**

Gold, my lord; bright gold!

Nothing has quite the ring of gold!

And diamonds, like embodied light
Nothing has their matchless glitter!
And pearls like frozen dewdrops!
And rubies like glowing embers.
Do look, my lord! Do look!

(The Queen appears in tatters, looking distracted and extremely tired. The music stops at once and every one stands up.)

Queen : The bird sleeps in the soft straw.
Please, don't wake him.
Not until he's warmed the nest.
Oh, silvery bird!
I will protect you from the wind. Peck at the bough as long as you wish.
Oh, silvery bird!
I will fold you in my eyes and make you feel secure.
Stretch your feathers and relax, and sink into a happy sleep.
At your dread touch, anything will burn and turn to ashes to be
Blown about the earth by the soft night breeze.
Woe to him who wakes the sleeping bird!
For he will break the barred gates of time and shatter the locks,
And from the subterranean vaults of the past release
The bold and arrogant ghosts of darkness.

The dead will swarm the streets and snatch the bread
From the mouths of the living.
The drought will come, and stay for years and years;
The wheat will dry up into chaff with no grain;
The milk will curdle in the mothers' emaciated breasts.
(Goes to the Vizier.)
Sir, will you give me a cutting of your tree
To grow myself a child?

Viz. **(sternly, pushing her away)**
: My lady! What made you leave your room?
Go back to the royal apartments.
The King never liked anyone to see you, certainly not the common people!
Not even we, the notables.
When you crossed our view, we lovered our eyes and wiped them clean
Of any flicker of feeling or expression
To avoid his fiery anger.
Go back, my lady. Go back.

Queen : The heedless tempests have crushed under their mighty feet
Your verdant trees
To make you lose your way in a desolate, arid desert
Until your head becomes the colour of bleached dust,
And your garment as ragged as that of a tramp
Who begs for a crust of black bread.
(Turns to the Historian.)
Would you inscribe a line of history on my body, sir,
And help me create a child?

Hist. : Oh, God!
Will the last chapter of the late king's history be
An account of his Queen's madness!

Queen : Madness scatter your brains! May your wits flee your head like a quarry flees a hunter

Whom the wood sylphs have cursed.
May darkness reign upon your heart until such day as you can slake your thirst with fire and warm yourself with water!
(To the Judge)
Fold your robes about me sir,
To increase your fold,
And let me bear a child.

Judge : My lady, go back into the royal quarters.
Do not violate the sanctity of the king and desecrate his death.

Queen : May the gates of your house be as weak as dry straw;
May your home be as inviolate as a much trodden path;
May the night ashes scorch you
Until your face becomes as black as a dark crow's.

Poet : **(taking the initiative)**
: Look my way, my lady.
Like you, I hate this scene;
But what can I do? I have nothing but words,
And mere words do not create a child.

Queen : It seems to me we shall be friends.
Tell me,
Were you fond of your parents?

Poet : I gave them all my memory.

Queen : As a boy, did you like music?

poet : It was my leafy shelter
In the deserts of silence
That lie between the mountains of roaring noise.

Queen : Do you hear the music playing now?

Poet : In the babble and the gabble of many tongues and voices,
I can always recognize her distinctive language.

I even sense her presence before she comes; I can smell her in the air.
Indeed, I summon her when I wish.
(Whistles a tune as if he's trying to reproduce the music he alone can hear.)

Queen : What do you hear? Tell me.

Poet : I hear a music that sings of things ordinary,
Yet, unique;
Things which happen to everyone,
But happen only once.
(Pause.)
Forgive me. The music stopped. It must have found me stupid and naive.
I wanted to capture in a few silly words a meaning
Beyond the power of words.
But, she'll forgive me soon.

Queen : I knew we would be friends.
Shall we sit down for a while?

poet : Whatever you say, my lady.
(They sit in a corner and silently converse while the others continue with their efforts to wake the king until sleep overcomes them. They fall asleep standing up.)

Queen : Do you have a child?

Poet : I do. I carry him about in my bundle of dreams.
When I wish, I can loosen the knot and take him out.

Queen : Why don't you carry him in your arms?

Poet : I won't do that.
I'd rather let him loose in the sunny woods and on the breezy banks of the river
To flower into a green miracle as thousands of tree do.

Queen : Will you teach him poetry and wisdom?

Poet : The flocks of birds will teach him wisdom,
And the rhythm of the waves, feet, beats, and versification.

Queen : Will you come with me?
Poet : Where to, my lady?
Queen : Anywhere where death does not cast his dark shadow over the living.
Poet : I cannot, lady.
I am part of this dead scene.
Queen : You can.
Shake the black dust off your garments.
Poet : I can't, my lady; it is too late.
I dare not enter a world in which the light goes free;
It will blind me, and I will crush my bones against some dumb and solid wall;
For I have lived for long among the dim and eyeless mirrors of this palace.
I feel I could not breathe except in these grim corners.
The fresh and fragrant purity of the world would soon stop my putrid breath
Which, so well-used and suited to this tomb,
Can only creep in and crawl out like a greedy worm.
Queen : We'll go together, hand in hand.
You'll get accustomed to the sparkling light;
Soon, underneath the hard stone, a dark spring of blood will flow,
At first with fear and hatred,
Until the hardened black crust cracks.
Afterwards, the spring will purely flow with love.
What do you own in this prison?
Poet : Some cash,
My flute,
And a book of verse.
Queen : Let's go then.
Poet : My Queen. You know,
I feel as if something inside me is crumbling,
As if my soul is being torn apart by a thousand dreams,

both bitter and sweet.
And in my tired eyes, rings of smoke rise up and fade.
I do not know.....The present, past and future seem to merge, as if their gates have opened all at once
To flood the chambers of my mind,
And each blows its own hurricane.
The past ten years are now collapsing, disappearing fast, leaving no trace,
As easily as shallow music fades away,
As smoothly as the robe of a whore slips down to her bare feet.
I can remember now my humiliation and my shame the day the king bought me for a mere drink,
And one that proved so sour,
In order to deform and stunt my soul, to knead and roll me
Into a refreshing poppy-seed he could keep under his tongue and suck.
I have become a hollow man, unable to hold my head up.

Queen : What else do you remember?
Relieve your mind to me.

poet : I remember how hopelessly insignificant I felt the first time I saw you.
I was a humble man, and only dared steal a look.

Queen : Was that when the king brought me to the palace?

Poet : No, it happened by the river.

Queen : Before he took me captive?

Poet : I saw you standing there, casting to the sun the silken ropes of poetry,
As if you were a sailor drawing the sun-boat to your green shore.
I told myself that a mere poet could not hope to possess such beauty;

It was worthy of a mighty king.
I fell in love with you and thought you were too good for me.

Queen : And so you wished me captive?!

Poet : How could I?! I only lived to love you.
Sometimes I would glimpse you, like a phantom in a dream, gliding through the dimly-lighted rooms,
And would stretch my aching, longing hands to feel the air you moved through,
Only to find you melting into the drak drapes.
You were a mirage that fitfully gleamed to a man lost in a desert;
A visionary spring that never quenched the soul's thirst.
Slowly, my love congealed; it neither flowed nor ceased; it never bled itself to find relief.
It remained a prisoner in my frightened, broken heart,
Like blood in the blue veins of a corpse.

Queen : Would you like to see me once more by the river?

Poet : Can we bring back the dead past, my lady?

Queen : No, we can put it out of sight, blink it off our lashes where it clings.
Let's leave at once.

Poet : I have to say goodbye to my companions.

Queen : Well, say goodbye.

Poet : Farewell, my friends.
Wake up! Are you dead?! Are you dead too?!
I beg your pardon.
Well, you all know
How madly I've always loved her,
And, indeed, I'm grateful you've kept my secret which, though it often longed to break free and soar upon the wings of passion, was forced by fear to be sensible and cautious.

Oh! How I used to call her in my restless sleep!
How I ached and burned for her until I felt my frame disintegrate and melt
Between the pants of desire and the sighs of frustration!
Now I long to rub her feet with my poetry as we rub the feet of saints with scented oil!
Therefore, farewell, my friends.
We lived as neighbours through the years of death,
Looked after by the same mad under-taker, and covered ourselves with the same hard clods of earth
And shared the cursed charity cakes baked in memory of the dead.
But now, I go.
She's asking me to follow.
A child, I cannot give her,
For when I bartered my freedom for bread, I became an empty husk.
But I can make her rise in joy,
And go back to the river to cast the silken ropes of poetry to the sun once more
While I watch her, infatuated.

Viz. : Stop! You're mad!
She made him lose his mind!

Hist. : What a pity! Poor man

Judge : Restrain him by force.

Hist. : When the King returns he will punish him as Solomon punished the hoopoo.

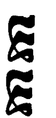
Poet : Do you really believe the King will come back?

Viz. : Most certainly he will.

Poet : Oh, no! You see, the King fell dead when he, one night,
Looked at himself in the clear mirror
Of this woman's eyes.

Do you know
What the real name of the dead King was?
Death.
Do you know his titles?
Walking death....Sleeping death.....Moving death....
his most majestic, his most glorious,
His most high and mighty death.
Every touch, or thought, or look of his spelt death.
He touched the river; it died.
He touched the palace; it died.
He touched you, and you died. I did too.
My lord Chief Judge, you are dead,
And so are you, and you, and you.
But, perhaps you Judge are more dead than any of us
For you were closest to the King.
This woman alone escaped the cursed touch.
And now she's touched me, I can rise up and leave you
with the dead.
I leave you with the dead.

Curtain



Scene ii

(The Curtain is down. The scene takes place in the area in front which represents a shack by a river. The Queen is laughing happily.)

Queen : Stop, please!
Let me catch my breath!
I shall split my sides laughing!
Look how I quiver! As if the rays of the sun are tickling me!
As if the crazy, frivolous wind is sneaking up my dress
To touch my sides!
You have such a wonderful talent for spinning a yarn!

Poet : I beg your pardon. I swear to you that was no yarn. It really happened.
I never invent my stories; I only touch them up here and there to make them more colourful.
Indeed, sometimes I can perceive behind the evasive, illusive aspect of an object
Its inner mood and hidden feeling,
And then it wears a different colour in my eyes.
Take the blue horizon, for example;
Well, I do not think it's always blue,
Nor is the dark soil of the river
Always dark.

Queen : What colour are they then, my poet?

Poet : Well, it depends on their mood.

Queen : Their mood!

Poet : When flushed with joy, the horizon
Wears a rosy hue,
Just like you now.

Queen : A poet's typical notion.
How long have you been writing poetry?

Poet : I do not know, my lady. I can't remember.

Queen : Surely you're not that old!

Poet : I truly do not know, my lady.
How long have I had these legs?
How long have I had my voice?
How long have I had this nose in my face?
How long have I been writing poetry? It's all the same.
Well, I don't remember.

Queen (Laughs):
: Did you know love as a young man?

Poet : No, my lady;
But I knew infatuation.

Queen : Infatuation!

Poet : Yes. I was once infatuated with a rose.
I loved the way she blazed at the touch of light and displayed her charms;
The way she gracefully poised herself on her tall, slender stem;
Her patient tolerance of human hands;
Her vulgar abandon as she bared her secret parts and lay absorbed in erotic pleasure until her passion tore her apart.
I even loved the illusive aroma of rottenness
That she diffused as she finally lay crushed.

Queen : And are you infatuated with someone now?

Poet : With many....words.
We play together a secret game of hide-and-seek in the waning light of the moon,
Or in the fading light of the lamp.

Queen : And after that?

Poet : Nothing. I catch them and possess them.

Queen : Well, nothing will come of nothing.

Don't you sometimes ask yourself what end your words serve?

Poet : No end.

Queen : But they have to have a purpose,
An object to fulfill, like the rest of man's inventions,
Or God's creation -
Like the flower and the wind,
Freedom and the arrow,
The heights and the depths,
Music, the musical instrument, and the grape-vine,
And the wisdom of the wise, and the trunks of the trees, and the shells in the sea,
And, even, dreams.

Poet : You are right. But what can words do?
They are too weak and fragile to aspire to action;
Too insubstantial to act as a sword or a cog;
They're powerless to deal a fatal blow or even ward off one.

Queen : Don't undervalue your words.
A word can do a lot.
You do not know what words, like yours, did to me when I was young.
I heard a sensitive boy with sparkling eyes
Play his flute and sing a song that said
I was the most beautiful thing anyone ever laid eyes on.
That made me beautiful.
A few years later I heard a voice that said
I gleamed when naked like the silver river.
I went to the river and took off my clothes
To contemplate my naked beauty.
Soon I heard someone say I was a healing spring,
A flowering bough the sight of which cures
All pains and ailments.

Poet : My Queen,
Some of my verses echo in my mind now. They say:
How poor is he who cannot put his joy in words
Who, when his eyes embrace his love, can only lamely exclaim:
"I am so happy!"
How poor is he who cannot find the words to express his love,
Who, when the beloved is near, can only lamely exclaim:
'But, Oh, my love!'

Queen : Have your eyes now got used to the light?
How would you like to fall in love once more with a rose, a blooming one this time, not dead?

Poet : My lady!

Queen : Promise me to shut away the past and lock the gates.

Poet : But pardon me, my lady, what can I do if a part of it,
Like this man here, slips out of the window?

Queen : Who is this man?

Poet : The King's tailor.

(The Tailor approaches hesitantly until he stands before the the Queen and the poet. He waves and smiles his greetings.)

Queen : What do you want?

(The Tailor gestures that he would like to join the Queen and the poet in their exile.)

Queen : Why doesn't he speak?

Poet : The King had his tongue cut off
The day he died.
He can't speak, but he can hear.
Come closer. Tell me what you want.

(The Tailor goes through the same gestures once more.)

Poet : Go away and leave us.
You are a tatter of the past.

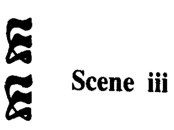
(The Tailor gesticulates in defence of himself, then weeps silently.)

Poet : I can't make out what he wants.
Well, do as you like.

(The Tailor smiles and murmurs, then shyly sits near the Queen and the poet, but at a respectful distance, as a follower would.)

Poet : It seems he wants to stay with us,
To elude the past like us.
But he is luckier than we are;
He only lost his tongue.
Still, what a wretched man he is!
A man whose declining days have scattered away the remnants of his powers;
A man who on his pillow hears, not the beating of his heart
But the beating heart of fear;
A man who lost the innocence of his words,
And was powerless to raise a sword and take revenge.

Blackout



Scene iii

(The Curtain opens to reveal the King's men still fast asleep in their upright positions. They wake up suddenly with a start.)

Judge : Oh, dear! What a strange dream! May it forebode no evil!

Viz. : What is it?

Judge : Nothing.

Viz. : Come on, you can tell me.

Judge : I heard a voice speak to me out of the darkness;
Perhaps it was a dream that lost its way in that enchanted land
Between sleep and waking,
Perhaps an inner voice that crept out of the depths
To whisper in my head.

Hist : What did you hear exactly?

Judge : A few distant echoes.

Viz. : I was afraid to speak,
But I did hear it too, and I recognized the voice.
True my soul was deep into the well of sleep,
But I could never mistake the ring or tones of his voice.

Hist. : What did he say?

Viz. : Didn't you hear him then?

Hist. : I heard a few words,
But I'm not sure whether I really heard them
Or merely dreamt them.

Viz. : What were the words?
As official historian, you are the memory of the state.

Hist. : They were slow and rather muffled,
As if the speaker was forcing each syllable through his teeth.

Judge : What were the words?
Hist. : They said:
I want the Queen by my side.
Viz. : Just what I heard with my own ears!
Judge : Exactly the words I heard!
He wants the Queen to lie beside him.
Viz. : We must fetch her then.
Hist. : And make her lie beside the King's corpse.
Judge : Alive or dead?
Viz. : Well, I'm not sure. Let's ask him. He may answer.
Let's go up and ask him.

(They go up to the King, the Vizier leading the way. The Executioner lingers behind and stops half way up the staircase.)

Viz. : Good morning your most exalted majesty.
what is your wish?
Voice (amplified as if coming through a magnifier):
: I want the Queen beside me.
Viz. : Allow me to inquire, Sire,
Do you want her alive or dead?
Voice : I want the Queen beside me.
Viz. : Would you feel happy if she came and slept beside you?
Voice : I want the Queen beside me.
Viz. : Would the black bird of death
Leave your majesty's body then?
Voice : I want the Queen beside me.
Viz. : **(to the others)**
: Who should go to fetch the Queen?
Judge : She's got that idiot of a poet with her.
Hist. : Never mind him; he's too insignificant.
When he sees a sword he starts running and only his own shadow can overtake him.
Whom should we send?
Judge : The Executioner, of course; who else?

Viz. : Executioner!
Have you heard just now the late King's voice
Declaring his desire to have the Queen beside him?

Exec. : I heard nothing.

Viz. : That doesn't matter. We have.
Go and fetch the Queen.

Exec. : And where would I find her now?

Hist. : She must have gone to that deserted shack by the river,
Where she had lived for a while.

Judge : Yes. To relive the past.

Exec. : You want her dead or alive?

Viz. : Alive.

Exec. : Then leave the poet to me to do with him what I like.

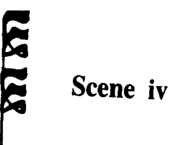
Viz. : You know best what to do with him.

Exec. : Is any of you coming along with me?

viz. : We'll catch up with you soon.

Exec. : Well, I'm going.
I really see no reason why I should; I heard no voice,...
Still, why shouldn't I fetch the Queen? I heard no voice
Telling me not to.
Whether this will bring the dead king back to life or no,
I do not know.
Still, I will enjoy myself toying with the poet's ribs,
For I have long hated that cunning fool.
Something in his aspect does not appeal to me.

Curtain



Scene iv

(The river-side. The Queen and the Tailor are sitting and conversing cheerfully while the poet paces up and down slowly not far away from them. He occasionally pauses, then continues his pacing.)

Queen : The silence which drops from your frightened eyes
Is more eloquent than words.
Of course you have the slave mentality:
When you rebel against your master, you immediately rush into the service of his opponent.
You hear me, but you cannot speak.
That is why, when I talk to you,
I feel as if I'm speaking to myself, to some frightened part of me.
Tell me: do you think he will give me a child?
Do you think he realizes now that love is a longing to build the future
And not a yearning for oblivion?
(The Tailor nods.)
I shall make myself beautiful for him.
I shall let my loose hair fall about my face
And bite my lips until they bleed and become like two red cherries bursting with desire.

Poet (as if praying to the sun):
: Mistress of the blue and cloudy meadows!
If only I could break like your beams when they touch the ground!
If I could die! Or fall apart!
I cannot bear the burden of this moment.

It is as if my soul is about to split, become divided, and disperse
In this, the most teeming moment of my life, the most pregnant with desire and... impotence,
With joy, and... fear.
With memories, and....forgetfulness,
With yearning, and.... pity.
I feel unable to really live my love,
To respond to the look of desire in her kind eyes.
What is it with me? Have I turned into ashes, or is there still a glimmer of fire left in me?
I'll put my love in words.
Oh, it's useless! I can't write a thing! Naked sounds crowd into my ears,
Having cast off the garb of words, like disembodied shadows,
And images pour down so fast into my eyes I cannot grasp them!
How strange it is that when we're richest in feelings
We become poorest in words!
I'll let my flute speak for me.

(The Poet plays the flute. The Executioner appears at the far end of the stage and approaches slowly.)

Exec. : So, here you are, fool! And still croaking like a scabby cricket too!
Take this rope and bind yourself that you may
not run away and wait.
Be patient. I'll attend to some business first
and then come back to you.
If you haven't died of fear by then,
I'll finish you off with this lethal sword.
(To the Tailor.)
Are you here too?

You'd better run and save your skin,
For though I have nothing against you, you seem to me peculiarly out of place in this pageant.
My lady,
The King is asking for you.

Queen : A dead man should only ask for a coffin,
For soon the worms will be asking for him,
To feast on his corpse.

Exec. : My lady,
The King has whispered to his men
In the dead of night, as they stood around his bed like tall pillars,
That he wishes you to lie beside him.

Queen : Beside Death?!

(The Tailor approaches the Executioner entreatingly, as if he is trying to remind him of their old friendship, and tries to intercede for the Queen.)

Exec. (Kicking him away):
: Go away! What have you got to do with this, you laughing stock?!
Beware! My sword has been dry and thirsty for quite some time,
And every evening it cries out for blood.
I do not know how much longer I can stand his agony;
he's my companion, friend, and twin-brother.
True he never drinks but the best vintage;
Still, I don't think he would mind a few drops of your adulterated blood.
(Draws his sword. The Tailor runs away, weeping voicelessly.)
Execuse me a moment, my lady;
I'll just finish off this wretch.
(turning to the poet)

Have you tied yourself well?
Always proud and haughty, aren't you! even at the moment of death!
Be patient, my lady,
For I want first to tickle him a bit with my sword.
I shall begin with the eyes,
For I don't like the look in them.
(Advances to the poet who suddenly darts his flute and plunges it into the Executioner's eyes. The Executioner screams and staggers back, one hand clapped on his bleeding eye, the other beating about with the sword aimlessly.)
Ah! He took me off my guard, the stray dog! I'll tear you up with my bare teeth.
I won't be satisfied with simply smashing your head, and crushing your ribs!
Don't draw back from the edge of my sword!
Let me hear your voice. Where are you? My sword will find you, disembowel you,
And break every bone in your body!

Queen (Goes to the poet, takes his hand, and holds it up):
: You've beaten the Executioner,
And triumphed over fear!
The flute has played the song of blood,
While the Executioner's tyrannical sword
Has become helplessly blind and lost its way. Advance!
Strip him of his sword.
(The Executioner, hearing the poet's hard breathing and the Queen's voice, lunges his sword in their direction and wounds the poet in his arm.)

Queen (kneeling at the feet of the Poet)
: Let my face catch a few drops of your blood. What a joyful, welcome wound this is!

Don't lose heart! Don't retreat! Advance and fight!
Take blood for your blood. Let your precious, fragrant sap light up this moment and reveal its luminous meaning,
To dispel the thick black shadows of meaninglessness!
Let it drip on this earth, on history, a witness.
Look!
On the dry ground, two pools of blood stand side by side:
One pool is poisoned, the bloody executioner's;
The other, pure and luminous - the poet's.
How strange that they should lie side by side, one to be recorded in the black pages of history,
The other, in its white, glorious ones.
(The Poet and the Executioner begin to wrestle; the Poet strips him of his sword. He pauses for a second with the sword in his hand. The Executioner suddenly rushes at him, but impales himself on his own sword. The poet who had suffered another wound in the fight collapses into the arms of the Queen.)

Queen : Let me feel your wound. How beautiful and radiant!
A dusky sunrise; the eyes of the narcissus; a sunflower; the blood of the Holy Virgin;
The essence of meaning and wisdom; the long-lost Holy Grail,
Let me touch it with my lips that I may regain my soul and eternally keep it.
How fragrant is this blood! The captive scent in the primitive, wild body!
Let me smell it! Let me fill my lungs with this rare and secret perfume!
Oh, this blood! How deeply red! I will adorn myself with it
I will wear it like 'henna' on the parting of my hair.

What a beautiful red paint
To wear on my pale and withered lips.
Ah! I'm satisfied! My soul is full,
And my eyes are content.
It was for me you shed this blood.
But, oh! How heartless of me!
You should save this blood for me, to nurture my days, to kindle my joy.
I'll tend your wound, or, rather, mine.
What a scorching flame is coming through your lips
Despite your tired, wet face!
(Kisses him.)

Poet : My lady!

Queen : No, say my love.

Poet : My love,
I feel as if an icy current is coursing through my veins,
And slowly oozing out in little drops all over my body,
Drawing out all the heat.

Queen : My love is ripening like mature grapes in a thick vineyard.
If you squeeze it, it will flow with wine.
(They draw closer.)
Are you well?

Poet : I'm nearly well again.
A few moments ago I wanted to die.
But now,....
I want to live, for your sake.

Queen : It's the miracle of the river.
How wonderful it would be if the spirit of the universe
Could visit me here and breathe its mystery into me

Until it filled me, as a ripe fruit fills with honeyed juice!

And when my time comes,
I would go to the palm tree,
And shake the trunk towards me.....
If this could happen, we wouldn't need blood to settle our differences.
I would only have to point to the babe, and he would speak.

Poet : My love, your dream of the child was a true vision.
It was as if you had looked into the future.
But did you ever imagine
That a poet would father the child?

Queen : The man who can fight with a flute and sing with a sword
Will father my child.

Poet : I miss my flute.
I want to breathe into it my love for you,
My yearning to sleep under your leafy boughs.
Its mouth is smeared with blood;
I'll wipe it off.
Oh, what a brave knight of a flute you are!

Queen : Let me wipe it on my chest
That it may recover its gracious, forgiving nature.
Oh, my loving flute!

(The Poet plays the flute and the Queen leans against him. The Tailor slinks out of his hiding place slowly and sheepishly. He sees the Poet and the Queen in each other's arms. He sits close by, but out of their view. The Queen takes the Poet's hand and helps him up; he leans on her and together they go into the shack.)

The lights come on





Act III

(The 3-Woman Chorus comes out from behind the Curtain and faces the audience.)

1st Woman:

,The stage-manager tellsus that the author told the director who in turn told him so that he could tell us so that we can tell you that at this stage in the play, when the action reached the climax, the author felt extremely at a loss how to proceed. For according to drama experts, a climax should always and immediately be followed by a sad or a happy ending, or an anti-climax.

2nd Woman:

In other words, the author had three options, and, accordingly, thought up three alternative endings to the play. Unfortunately, he couldn't make up his mind which one to choose. And since you'll have to come to his aid, we'll refresh your memory with a brief resume of what happened so far. At this point in the play, i.e. the climax, the King's men are awaiting the return of the Executioner with the Queen, having told us that they might catch up with him. The Poet, on the other hand, has been transformed into a valiant knight and an efficient lover, and it is possible, therefore, that the Queen may after all realize the prophecy of the oracles of fate and bear the seed of the future which will bring forth in the fulness of time the promised babe. We've also left the dead King insisting that the Queen should come and lie beside him that he might conquer death and drive the black bird out of his heart and mouth.

3rd Woman:

Each of the three alternative endings provided by the author represents one of the three stock human reactions to any problem: to complain to the higher powers of fate and ask for justice; to wait and do nothing, putting one's trust in time; or to face up to the situation, no matter how difficult or complex and act.

1st Woman:

And since the author wasn't quite sure which of his endings you would prefer, he decided to show you all three of them. However, he has given us his solemn word that the ending you choose, that is, the one most of you feel happy with, will be the only one we play tomorrow. For, as the author firmly says, we are not here to teach you but, rather, to learn from you.

2nd Woman:

Now, we shall act out the first ending which represents the human tendency to refer one's problems to the higher powers of fate and ask them to solve them. But before we begin, we have to pave the way with a bit of narration.

3rd Woman:

The King's men grcw impatient at the Executioner's delay and, therefore, made their way, with many followers, to the Poet's and the Queen's hide-out. They forced the Queen to go back with them and made her lie beside the King's corpse, which was already beginning to stink. They waited for a long time for the King to wake up, but in vain. They finally decided to dispatch both King and Queen to the underworld.

1st Woman:

As for the Poet, he was mad with fury and quite frantic. He decided to descend to the underworld, Orpheus-like, to plead with

the fates who preside over the court of justice there to return his beloved to him. And so he set out on his long and fearful journey. Here he comes....Let's make way for him.

Poet : My lady, my treasure, my one precious jewel,
My fragrant garden, my silvery tent, my cool night and clear sky!
How can I ever rest, or have peace of mind
With you away, over there, out of my sight?!
Here is my extended hand,
Longing to hold yours, or even touch the tips of your sweet fingers.
My weary look is seeking the shelter of your eyes.
The river whose banks once echoed with our song is now sobbing in my ears;
And the cottage which folded its wings about us is pouring out its heart in tears.
Who would guide me
To the destinies' tribunal,
To the judges of the underworld,
Where the sun retires to sleep after her trip across the silvery sky?!

1st Woman : Walk until you reach the great sun-mountain.
Between its legs squats the cave of darkness
Where the sun sleeps after his daily trip.
At the entrance you will find two women, standing, waiting.
Ask them for directions and advance.
But no one is allowed into this silent valley of death
Carrying a sword, a spear, or an arrow.
Therefore, surrender here your sword.
This is the valley of security.

(The Poet lays down his sword.)
You can go ahead now.

Poet : My heart is knocking against my ribs and shaking my worn out frame,
And my tired chest whistles and creaks with my breath, like an open shell.
I pray that the love we bear each other,
My injured woman and I,
May protect us both.
Here is the entrance of the cave.

1st Woman : What does this shadow, this wreck of a man
Seek in this enchanted land?

3rd Woman : His face is rather handsome
Despite his weary look.

2nd Woman : He'd look even better lying on my thirsty bed,
After a hot meal,
And an intoxicating drink.
His blood would then contentedly flow in his veins.
(Seductively to the Poet)
Listen, turn right,
My cottage is over there, under those leafy trees.

3rd Woman : No, turn left,
My cottage is there; the one with the climbing flowers.
There, you'll reign like a prince tonight.
You can stay until the cock crows at dawn.

Poet : Gentle ladies,
If you'd direct me to where I can find the lords of fate,
I should always remember and value your kindness above all else.

2nd Woman : You have such a cold heart!
How can you not respond to the yearnings of two

women in love with you?!

Poet : Only do me the great favour of telling me the way to the lords of fate.

3rd Woman : What is it you want from them?

Poet : The woman I love.
I will plead my case
And ask them to return her to me.

2nd Woman : Have they taken away your woman then
While frivolously sporting with the fortunes of the world?

3rd Woman : And is she beautiful?

Poet : Beauty cannot describe her, but, rather, she gives the word its meaning.

2nd Woman : Is she then more beautiful than me?

3rd Woman : Or me?

Poet : My two good ladies!!

2nd Woman : So, you can't forget her?!
Well, let's mix you a drink: water from Lethe
Laced with a prinkling of erotic musk.
When you've drunk it, perhaps your train of desires would take a different way and head for the two secret cottages,
There to rest, sleep and drink, and stop caring.
Or you may even change your mind and head back for the world,
As many, like you, have done before.

Poet : That will never be, my good ladies.
My precious one is there; she has my heart in her keeping; I dare not keep her waiting;
Tonight, back to the river we two must go.

2nd Woman : Open the gates, fairies of the magic mountain!
Proceed stranger. Our prayers go with you.

3rd Woman (bursting into tears)
: Our passionate, sincere prayers.

Fidelity moves me so deeply, It always makes me cry.

Poet : How thick and grim is the darkness!
It fastly falls like solid black sheets from a liquid black sky.
If it would only clear up for a while!
I walk, but cannot see where I am going,
As if my helpless feet were blown into direction by some mysterious air!
Ah I see some lights in the distance.
What's that? What does this sign over the deserted palace say?
The Destinies Tribunal?!

(the curtain rises to reveal the throne-room of Act I which has been redecorated to represent a court-room. Three judges sit on the upper level; they are: the Vizier, the Historian, and the Judge. They face the audience. The King and Queen sit facing each other on the left. In another corner, stands the Herald.)

Herald (shouting as the poet enters)
: I declare the court in session....cession....cession.

Vizier (to the poet)
: Plead your case.

Poet : My lords, the arbiters of fortunes,
Lords of wisdom and justice

Vizier (to his companions, proudly) :
: He knows who we are!

Judge : Well, doesn't everybody?!
Don't we hold their fortunes in our hands ?!

Hist. : I've often wondered why they let us do that...
I mean, why don't they keep them in their own?

Viz. : So that they may constantly worry us.
Where is the defendant ?

Poet : There, my lord. That man.

Viz. : Is he your King?

(The Poet nods.)

What is your profession?

Poet : I am a Poet.

Viz. : What is the charge? Has he delayed your grant? Or suspended your annual increment?

Poet : He took my woman.

Viz. : What do you say to that, Mister? Forgive me for not using your titles though we acknowledge them.
As you know, all are equal before the law,
The powerful vamp, and the wretched.... wretched....

Judge : Tramp.

Viz. : Yes. Indeed. And the wretched tramp.

King : I own her;
I won her by my sword.

Poet : She was never his own,
Though she was in his possession.
You can own things only when you give them of yourself,
Not when you only take away from them.
What belongs to you is a plant you tend, protect, and let grow and flourish in your shade,
Not what you let yellow and wither.
What you own is molten gold you shape and then reshape,
Not solid gold you hide behind a thick wall.
What belongs to you is a spring that you uncover to smile to the sun,
Not a spring you bury under stones.

Viz. : Not bad....not bad, quite eloquent!

King : I beg your pardon, Judge.
Let not the poet deceive you with his numerous

verbal shells.
Which hold no pearls of meaning.

Viz. : True....true. The Poet will not deceive us with pearls of meaning.
Which hold no numerous verbal shells.

King : I won her with my valiant sword,
And guarded her as closely as the ocean guards it pearls,
In the depths of his being.
I placed my gentle hands upon her and hid her from the eyes of men.
I was afraid her peace of mind would be disturbed
If she did see what happened in the world.
I kept her in the deep, dark shades
That the blazing heat of the sun may not wither
Her bright blossoms.

Poet : What did you give her?
She was like a cold marble statue adorning the gates of a ghost town.

King : I gave her what no man but me can give:
Security and peace of mind;
The serenity of a carefree heart, unworried by misery, unruffled by joy.

Poet : What you describe has another name;
It is usually called death.
But I, I gave her love,
A future to look forward to.
She awaited my rain like the restless earth
When it awaits the message of the wind, the harbinger of good news,
Of the promise of fertility.

King : Judges, don't waver in administering justice!
She is my woman by the right of the sword and

the right of the past:
My shadow has fallen upon her sheets.

Poet : No, judges of our fortunes!
She's mine by the right of love and the right of the future.
She bears my child. He's forming inside her now.

Viz. : Well. now
Hear the verdict of the lords of fate:
The court has decided that these two men
(Titles acknowledged, though dispensed with),
Should share this woman.
Since this man has won her by his sword,
He is to take the head, and what is underneath until the waist.
The other has given her a child;
He, therefore, takes what is below the waist until the toes.
The court rises now.
Executioner, execute the court's verdict at once.

Poet (shouting)
: What a miserable verdict! Do you call this justice?
I was wrong to waste so much time.
Where is my sword?

(The Executioner advances towards him waving his sword threateningly.)

Viz. : Carry out the court's sentence, Executioner!

Poet : No. Wait... Listen!
If this is your final verdict,
To tear her apart and shed her blood,
Then I relinquish my claim.
Let him have her!

(Curtain. The three women appear and address the audience.)

1st Woman:

This,ladies and gentlemen, was the first of the three alternative endings - bringing the matter before the court of the lords of fate.

2nd Woman:

They ruled that the Queen be cut and halved and distributed between the Poet and the King - as if she were a pack of cards in a fateful game in which the stakes are life and death.

3rd Woman:

Such a verdict would be called nowadays a 'peaceful settlement', or a 'compromise', or, less pompously, if we steer clear of political jargon, living and let live.

1st Woman:

It is the kind of verdict by which the more justly deserving always loses. And if you recall the story of king Solomon and the two women, which most of us heard in childhood from our mothers and grandmothers, you will know exactly what I mean. Some of you, of course, may have not come across this old folk tale due to their refined upbringing and education. However, as intellectuals, they would have become familiar with it through Brecht's famous modern version which he called **The Caucasian Chalk Circle.**

2nd Woman:

In the story, Solomon rules that the two contesting women should play a tug of war, with the child as the rope. The real mother naturally refuses and relinquishes her right.

3rd Woman:

Whereupon, Solomon the Wise, at once, recognizes her as the real mother. But nowadays, where can we find something of

Solomon's wisdom?!

1st Woman:

And now, for our second ending, or alternative choice: Waiting.

2nd Woman:

Everyone waited. The King's men waited for the Executioner to return. They waited for a year, for two, for ten, and twenty, and are in fact still waiting when the Curtain rises.
The Queen and the Poet waited too, first for the child to be born, then to grow, then to learn the art of poesy and wisdom and a bit of fencing. And when he was twenty, they took him back to the palace. And now we shall see what happens.

(The Curtain rises to reveal a dark and gloomy palace, echoing with the hoots of owls, and covered in cobwebs. The King's men are sitting on the steps leading to the upper level. Their beards have lengthened and nearly touch the ground.)

Poet : Wake up you sleeping men!
Viz. : Who are you?

Youth : Is this my promised palace?!
These ruins crawling with worms and echoing with owls?!
What a wretched, sickening smell!
The smell of a long-stored corpse!
Queen : Nevertheless, it is your palace, my son.

Viz. (peering at them through the darkness and remembering with great difficulty):
: Could this be....the Poet? And if I remember correctly,
If my eyes don't deceive me, this must be the Queen.

But who is this youth? And where then is the Executioner?

Poet : If the fishes have found him unpalatable,
You'll find him inside the greedy eternal whale.
But if the whale has disgorged him onto land,
And if the earth has found his mutilated corpse digestible,
He must be by now a piece of a rusty old brick,
Or a branch of poisonous tree.

Viz. (yawning): We were waiting for him
When sleep overpowered us. Sleep will always have his way no matter what,
Especially with us old people.
We sent him to fetch the Queen.

Judge : Well, she's come of her own free will.
Never mind the Executioner now.
Let her go up and lie beside the King
That the black bird of death may leave him.

Poet : Enough of this idiotic drivel!
The King has turned into dust a long time ago.
Uncover him now. You'll only see the moss growing on his bed.
Go up and look.

(The Judge staggers up the stairs, looks at the King, and comes back.)

Judge : It's true. His robes have decayed into rags.
The King himself has turned into dust and moss.
We must have slept for a long time!
Who is this young man?

Poet : The rightful owner of the palace,
And the future.

Hist : Is this his name?
Well, let me take it down.
Damn it!

I can't see if this paper is written over or empty!

Poet : This is the Queen's son.
He is now twenty
And has come to claim his right
To sit on the throne.

Viz. : He can take what he likes,
And sit where he pleases.
We couldn't care less. We only want to sleep.

Queen : Wear your crown my son,
And take your rightful place on the throne.

(The youth tries to wear the crown but it crumbles in his hands. He sits on the throne but it immediately collapses underneath him. He tries to right it up, and, at once, the room begins to rock and the curtains drop to the floor.)

Youth (stumbling through thick cobwebs):
: Is this a palace or a curse?! The angels of death and destruction
Must have put a curse on it!
I see nothing round me but ruins and decay!
Everything is falling to pieces;
Everything is diseased and rotting: The crown, the throne,
The walls,
The curtains and the stairs.
Even the beards of these startled wraiths are rotting!
Is it woodworm? Death? Or a curse!
What should I do now?
Is this the prize I have been dreaming of year after year?
The future's gift?!
How should I begin my reign?
And if I wanted to put things right and restore the palace,

Where should I begin?
With this dark corner,
Or with this ramshackle one?
The best solution would be to pull down these ruins of the past and rebuild the palace.

Viz. : You can't my son. It's impossible.
We are prisoners in this hall.
The rest of the palace has been taken over
By the prince of the western shore.

(Curtain. The three women appear.)

1st Woman:

That,ladies and gentlemen, was the second alternative ending. We do not know whether it has appealed to you or not - dramatically speaking of course, for as you know, we make no pretence of telling you a true story. However, we have promised to show you all three endings before asking you to compare and choose between them. Therefore, prepare to see our third and last alternative.

2nd Woman:

And remember, the ending you choose tonight will be the only one we play tomorrow. The author of course will have to write it up a little, and add a bit of padding here and there to make it long enough for a whole Act. Otherwise, the actors themselves will have to improvise scenes and ad lib chunks of dialogue to swell it up.

3rd Woman:

And now, for our third option. We start with the Poet sleeping with the Queen in their river shack. In the morning, they wake up smiling, looking back contentedly on their night's labour, and forward, excitedly, to the future. As for the Tailor,.. Well, he must be lurking somewhere nearby. Now we stand aside and watch.

(The Queen and the Poet come out of the shack. The Executioner's sword stands against the wall.)

Queen : Is this the Executioner's sword?
Poet : Yes.
I removed his straps
And fastened them to the sword's hilt
That I may wear it in the day.
Queen : And what did you do with the strapless shoulder?
Poet : I threw it into the river
With the rest of his limbs.
Queen : You got up at night then?
Poet : After you went to sleep. You looked so happy and fulfilled,
Occasionally stretching and turning, like a rippling spring.
I was gone and back in no time.
Queen : Let me help you on with the sword.
Poet (Kneeling in front of her)
: Knight me your poetical knight.
Queen : Rather, my knightly poet.
Let me receive your vow:
Swear to be always faithful,
To put your hand and heart into my service.
Poet : I swear.
Queen : You swear to put your words in my service too?
To sing to me until I sway with pride?
For then my tree will drop sufficient fruit to satisfy the hunger of the poor.
Poet : I swear.
Queen : Do you swear to accompany me on my daily trip with the golden sun,
And my nightly passage with the circling moons?
Never to leave me walk alone or dream alone?
Poet : I swear.

Queen : Then rise Sir Poet-Knight.
Poet : We have to leave now. Do you have a plan?
Queen : I leave all planning to you
Poet : Rather to my sword.

(They go along the road leading to the palace. They stop in front of the Curtain; it opens to reveal the throne-room as it was in Act I. They step into it. The Herald at once announces their arrival.)

Herald : The Queen....een....een.... and the Poet...oet....oet...

(The Vizier and the Judge wake up with a start.)

Viz. : Where is the Executioner?
Could it be that he has persuaded my lady the Queen to come back of her own free will
To lie beside his majesty and obey his royal will?!
What a really generous heart you have, my lady!

Queen : And what a truely stupid man you are, my lord!
If you're looking for the Executioner,
You can find him....
(To the Poet)
You tell them where they can find him.

Poet : In the river (if it hasn't thrown him up).
At this very moment
He is busy looking for a jem one of his grand-mothers dropped
And a fish swallowed.

Hist. : Do you mean to say he drowned?

Poet : No, he was killed,
Having bequeathed his sword to me.
I mean to say, we packed him off to the other world.
(Draws his sword.)

Judge : What do you want?
We'll do whatever you want,

	Only put this lethal edge away.
Poet	: For me, I want nothing. My lady, however, may have some requests.
Judge	: My lady, Your wishes.
Queen	: I want my kingdom back, and this palace.
Viz.	: You have them.
Queen	: For myself, and my offspring.
Viz.	: Offspring?
Queen	: My child.
Viz.	: The late King's son?
Queen	: No, the son of the immortal river.
Viz.	: Who?
Queen	: The child of the open wound, The open sacred book; The child of the divinely inspired sword.
Judge	: But I can see no child, my lady?
Queen	: He'll come. He will. The future never breaks a promise, or miss a date Especially when he makes it in a mother's womb.
Hist.	: But the King has asked for you.
Poet	: Indeed? And why not for you?
Judge	: I heard him with my own ears asking for the Queen.
Poet	: You lie, For death only invites the dead. Come, all of you. Together you must lift the King's corpse, And bear him To his tomb, And there, stay with him until he gets accustomed to his death. Go on, go on, or else he'll pour his fury on your heads.

(He pokes them with his sword. They scurry out. He goes to the Herald.)

You must go as well. You'll be needed to announce the titles of the garbage of history
As they come to call on your lord in his damp hole.
Go. At once.

(The Queen and the Poet stand side by side holding hands. They glimpse the Tailor shyly slinking in. The Queen calls him.)

Queen : You there! Approach!
You'll be my entertainer, my companion.
I know you can't speak,
But it will do me good to hear your words choking in your throat,
To hear the moaning of your slain voice,
And ask myself sometimes where your tongue has gone.
For then, the past will rear its head and I'll remember.

Poet : My lady, who are to be the Queen's men?

Queen : The people, everyone of them.
My door is open to the sick and poor,
To the lovers, the tramps, the artisans and the hired- hands.
We'll populate this palace and dispel its deathly silence
With the noisy concerns of the living.
In the lean days, we'll equally share the distress, like an exacted tribute we all have to pay;
And in the fat days, we'll equally share out our good fortune, like a glittering treasure.

Poet : My lady,
How kind and generous you are!

Queen : Will you stay with me?
Poet : Always and for ever, my love.
Queen (with some reserve):
: I am Queen now.
But, my heart will always cherish your memory.
Poet (ardently, kneeling before her):
: My lady, my most gracious lady!
How brightly you shine in your palace!
I am, and always will be your obedient, faithful servant.
Queen : Rather say, my companion who loves me to extinction,
Who'll help me weave my dreams for the future,
Who'll sing of a better, brighter future,
A better, brighter future.

(Curtain. The three women come out and face the audience.)

1st Woman:

And that was our third and last alternative ending. Friends, and allow me to call you friends, for we have spent a whole evening together......

2nd Woman:

Which of our three endings do you choose? What did you say? What? Louder please, I can't hear you. Well, all right then. Tomorrow, this is the one we play and nothing else. And we will go on playing it until the show is over and is replaced by another, posing a different question, making a new demand on your intelligence.

And now, it's time to say goodnight. Oh! I beg your pardon. One moment if you please. We haven't yet introduced ourselves. My colleague will do the honours.

3rd Woman:

My name is.........
My friends here are.......
The other actors who took part in the play are:
...........as the Queen.
..........as the Poet.
..........as the King.
..........as the Vizier.
etc......

The lights come up in the auditorium







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